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THEATRICALS

Two Comedies

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THEATRICALS

TWO COMEDIES

TENANTS DISENGAGED

BY

HENRY JAMES

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In the Press

THEATRICALS

SECOND SERIES

THE ALBUM THE REPROBATE

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NOTE

It is but fair to these two little entertainments, as well as to two others that are to follow, to mention that they were conceived and constructed wholly in the light of possible representation—representation in particular conditions which it was hoped they might successfully meet, but with which in the event they had not the good fortune to consort. They were addressed in each case with extreme, perhaps with extravagant, deference to a theatre, to a company, and especially to the presumable interpreter of the part supposed to be the most actable or the most "sympathetic," and are therefore experiments essentially proportionate and practical. They are also experiments in the line of comedy pure and simple. If it be very naturally and somewhat sternly inquired, accordingly, why, failing of their sole application, they appear in a form which is an humiliating confession of defeat, I am afraid the only answer is that the unacted dramatist has still the consolation—poor enough, alas!—of the performance imaginary. There are degrees of representation, and it breaks his fall and patches up his retreat a little to be correctly printed—which is after all a morsel of the opportunity

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of the real dramatist. As Labiche and Ibsen would only be partly real to us if we had not their indispensable text, so the baffled aspirant may in offering his text delude or amuse himself with a certain pretension to indispensability. He recommends on this occasion his melancholy subterfuge to his numerous fellow-sufferers, who are surely welcome to such comfort as they can get. The covers of the book may, in a seat that costs nothing, figure the friendly curtain, and the legible "lines" the various voices of the stage; so that if these things manage at all to disclose a picture or to drop a tone into the reader's ear the ghostly ordeal will in a manner have been passed and the dim foot-lights faced. The publication of these simple attempts—so calculated for a "fit" or for a "bid" that they doubtless missed their way through an anxious excess of simplicity—is in a word a faint make-believe.

The situation presented in the first act of the first piece was directly, though long since, suggested by a short tale of the late Commandant Henri Rivière, a tale published some five-and-twenty years ago, if not more, in a single number of *La Revue des Deux Mondes*. The action of the play, which is a free translation of the subject of the story, greatly deviates, it must be admitted, from this original, though remaining distinctly indebted to it again for an incident in the third act. The idea on which "Disengaged" mainly reposes was supplied to the author by a little story of his own.

H. J.

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TENANTS

IN THREE ACTS

CHARACTERS

Sir Frederick Byng.
Norman Byng.
Captain Lurcher.
Claude Vibert.
Frost.
Mrs. Vibert.
Mildred.
Miss Dyer.

The action takes place at Beechingham Manor, a sequestered old house in Devonshire.

ACT FIRST

The spacious, sociable, old-fashioned hall at Beechingham, panelled in clear colours and used as a place of reunion. It opens, largely, into an ante-room, through the wide window of which the avenue of a small park and a charming horizon are shown, and which conducts on the left to the entrance of the house as well as to various apartments, and on the right to the staircase, to other apartments and to the billiard-room. On the right of the hall the door to the drawing-room; on the left the door to the library. The place shows signs of constant and familiar habitation and of studied comfort, but not of conspicuous luxury.

Miss DYER comes down impatiently from the window of the ante-room.

MISS DYER.

What a bore to have to wait half the day for your letters! The next position I accept, I shall make an early London post a condition.

Enter MILDRED through the ante-room from the left, with several letters in her hand.

MILDRED.

Here they are: I looked out for the groom in the park.

MISS DYER.

I'm not quite sure you ought!

MILDRED.

Dear Miss Dyer, you're never quite sure I ought! Here's a letter for you.

MISS DYER, with the letter.

Only one?

MILDRED.

Only one.

MISS DYER.

How stupid—from mamma! And are all the others for you?

MILDRED.

For me? who ever writes to me? Some of them are for Sir Frederick; the others are for Mr. Byng.

MISS DYER.

I suppose those are the ones you looked out for in the park!

MILDRED, holding up a letter.

This is the one. It has a big official seal, which I've taken the liberty to examine.

MISS DYER.

I'm not quite sure you ought!

MILDRED.

The deed is done, and the horrible thing is from the people in London, to put an end to his leave.

MISS DYER.

I think it high time!

MILDRED.

After a month—only a little month?

MISS DYER.

A month isn't so little, when one makes such a big use of it.

MILDRED, vague.

What use, pray—?

MISS DYER.

To make love to you!

MILDRED.

Why shouldn't he, if he likes me?

MISS DYER.

I'm not quite sure he ought!

MILDRED.

Neither am I. But perhaps he can't help it!

MISS DYER.

I think Sir Frederick will come to his aid. And since we're discussing the subject—

MILDRED.

Dear Miss Dyer, we're not discussing the subject.

MISS DYER.

Yes—I'm not quite sure we ought!

Enter NORMAN BYNG through the ante-room from the right.

NORMAN, hearing the last words.

You certainly oughtn't—if you mean reading my letters.

MILDRED.

I was just going to carry them to you. (Then as NORMAN takes the letters.) There's one with a dreadful seal.

NORMAN, looking.

Governmental? My death-knell!

MISS DYER.

Oh, you won't die, Mr. Byng—you'll get better.

MILDRED.

Certainly, my dear—if *you* nurse him! I must take Sir Frederick his letters.

NORMAN.

You'll come back, won't you?

MILDRED, at the door of the library.

To hear if you must go?

NORMAN.

Oh, I can read that without breaking the envelope!

MILDRED.

I'll come back.

Exit MILDRED to the library.

MISS DYER.

In that case I shall be in the way!

NORMAN, preoccupied, looking over his letters.

Oh, Miss Dyer—don't say that!

MISS DYER.

You know that's what I am here for—to be in the way.

NORMAN, still absent.

I see—we must do our duty. I've got to do mine.

MISS DYER, with much expression.

Be brave, then, Mr. Byng, and face it at whatever cost!

NORMAN, surprised at her manner.

It's all in the day's work.

MISS DYER.

You won't go without bidding me good-bye?

NORMAN.

Oh, dear no! Good-bye now, if you like.

MISS DYER, gazing at him a moment; then with unspeakable reproach.

Farewell!

Exit MISS DYER to the drawing-room.

NORMAN, alone.

She *is* a "companion" with a vengeance! She was engaged to be Mildred's, but she seems to want to be mine. (Re-enter MILDRED from the library.) My dear child, the bolt has fallen—the end of these golden days.

MILDRED, with a soft sigh of wonder and regret.

So suddenly—so soon?

NORMAN.

Doesn't it seem only yesterday that I came?

MILDRED, musing.

I don't know what it seems, Norman. It has made such a difference.

NORMAN.

Ah, they come quickly, such differences as that!

MILDRED.

Isn't it wonderful?—when everything is changed!

NORMAN.

Yes, a great new life is born, somehow, in a little instant of time. We've got to take care of it, Mildred—we've got to bring it up!

MILDRED, smiling sadly.

I hope you don't think it's delicate.

NORMAN.

I daresay it will thrive! (Grave, tender.) It's "promising"—it will be the support of our old age.

MILDRED.

Our old age? Shall we have to wait for that?

NORMAN.

I mean it will be the security, the foundation of our future. That's what you've done for me, darling—you've made me a future.

MILDRED.

You've made *me* a past—that began a month ago; blessed memories after you're gone!

NORMAN.

Ah, think of me—think of me then, dear girl!

MILDRED.

I shan't have to "think" of you—I shall see you, I shall hear you, I shall touch you.

NORMAN.

We shall be doing just the same thing, in that case, at just the same moment.

MILDRED.

We shall be together then, shan't we, after all?

NORMAN.

People *are* together when they hate sufficiently the things that keep them apart.

MILDRED.

You can trust me to hate them sufficiently!

NORMAN, who has looked off through the wide window.

This picture of peace and summer, of fragrant, fruitful confidence, of a kind of sacred safety, is the image of what has passed between us. I shall carry it with me, and it will be the world I shall really live in.

MILDRED.

But don't take it down yet! Surely they give you time.

NORMAN.

Five days. They'll do to break our hearts in!

MILDRED.

They'll do to break your father's. He asked me if you were here; so I judge he's coming to you. I must go.

NORMAN.

Don't be nervous—wait for him. If our minutes are numbered, let us at least not be cheated.

MILDRED.

When you talk of sacredness and safety, what do you do with the wolf in the fold?

NORMAN.

My father? He's the sheep-dog biting the lambs! Yes, he's sacred, dear man, but he's not particularly safe.

MILDRED.

I'm sure he's going to be dreadful—he has his ideas.

NORMAN.

He'd be so wise without them!

MILDRED, as the door of the library opens.

Here he comes.

NORMAN.

We *are* cheated!

MILDRED, from the ante-room.

We shall make it up!

Exit MILDRED to the right.

Enter SIR FREDERICK BYNG from the library.

SIR FREDERICK, who has seen Mildred.

You're not behaving well, Norman—neither is that girl.

NORMAN.

You don't know our excuse. (Handing one of his letters.) See what I've just received.

SIR FREDERICK, with the open letter; glancing over it and handing it back.

It's a great relief to me. If this summons hadn't arrived I should have been under the painful necessity of asking you to bring your visit to Beechingham to a close.

NORMAN.

You'd have turned me out of the house?

SIR FREDERICK.

Wouldn't that have been better than turning Mildred?

NORMAN.

I may be utterly wanting in acuteness, but I can't for the life of me understand why you should turn either of us.

SIR FREDERICK.

You're not in the least wanting in acuteness, but you're remarkably wanting in delicacy.

NORMAN.

Do you mean because I'm such a coarse brute as to be in love?

SIR FREDERICK.

Be in love as much as you please; but hold your tongue about it!

NORMAN.

What good will that do me?

SIR FREDERICK.

The good of keeping you a gentleman — so long as Mildred's my charge. She came into this house, as you know, by no inclination or invitation of mine, two years ago; when, the day after my return from India, my oldest friend, the friend of my earliest years, took it into his head to impose on me unexpectedly, on his death-bed as it were, the guardianship of his only daughter—of her unprotected youth, her unspotted honour, and her very considerable fortune.

NORMAN.

It *was* a favour to ask of a quiet widower—with so little experience of women!

SIR FREDERICK, dry.

Stanmore judged of my experience, and I appreciated his. His marriage had been deeply unhappy; it had led him to make some gloomy generalisations, and to wish, perversely if you like, but intensely, to consign Mildred to hands other than those *he* had fallen into. In a word, he held that the best influence for her would be an

honest gentleman as nearly as possible like himself. I accepted his confidence—I hold it sacred. But it has been a great complication.

NORMAN.

He overlooked your other incumbrance.

SIR FREDERICK.

You were in training for your career — taking your first far-away steps in it. He had scarcely seen you—he didn't focus you.

NORMAN.

Why should you assume that if he had done me that honour—

SIR FREDERICK.

He would have checked your aspirations? I assume nothing, and that's precisely why I don't assume that he would have wished his daughter—simply because you're my son—to bind herself to you before she has had a glimpse of another fate.

NORMAN.

The Rhadamanthus your early friend has made of you, sir, is a thing to make one beware of early friendships!

SIR FREDERICK, after a moment.

Do that indeed — in every sense of the term: make the largest application of the moral! Remember that when you reach my age, if you've had time to have a past you also still have time to suffer from it. Your past is on your back, and at fifty-seven you may have a good way farther to carry it.

NORMAN.

I should have thought your age delightful—it certainly makes *you* so! But your description of it sounds indeed alarming.

SIR FREDERICK.

The more reason for keeping an eye on it in advance. Reflect on that, and beware of entanglements. I didn't —but that's none of your business.

NORMAN.

None whatever, father.

SIR FREDERICK.

Don't be impertinent. You *are*, horribly, when you affect to criticise me for not thinking it consistent with the dignity of my office to throw my helpless ward, who has seven thousand a year, into the arms of my ambitious son, who has nothing.

NORMAN.

I'm not a beggar, you know.

SIR FREDERICK.

You're the next thing to it! You have no prospects to speak of from me. I left India with my pension, but with very little else—save the ruins of my constitution. I'm so little at my ease, at this moment, that I've made up my mind to a tiresome sacrifice.

NORMAN.

The sacrifice of what?

SIR FREDERICK.

The old lodge at Clere—the dowerhouse of the estate. I've determined to let it.

NORMAN.

That will rather be a gain, if you let it to pleasant people.

SIR FREDERICK.

Pleasant people are what I hope for. They may make a little company for Mildred.

NORMAN.

Especially, I suppose, if there's a sweet young man among them who hasn't the misfortune to be your son.

SIR FREDERICK.

He may be as sweet as he likes—he'll have to wait till she's of age.

NORMAN.

Which, by the terms of her father's cold-blooded will, is not to be till she's twenty-two.

SIR FREDERICK.

That gives you the measure of his circumspection, which I rigidly emulate.

NORMAN.

So that as she's only eighteen now—

SIR FREDERICK.

The sweet young men will have exactly four years to wait. For yourself, the first on the charming list, you'll

be so good as to wait in silence, and to go about your business meanwhile. In a word, you'll postpone all further overtures to Miss Stanmore till she is in a position to reflect, to compare, to choose—to dispose intelligently of her hand and her money.

NORMAN.

Your conditions are hard, sir.

SIR FREDERICK.

If you rebel against them you give me a pretext for making them harder.

NORMAN.

How *can* they be?

SIR FREDERICK.

My dear boy, don't force me to request you to go about your business on the instant.

NORMAN, after a moment.

Will you give me the very few days they allow me at headquarters?

SIR FREDERICK.

It's lucky for you they're numbered! (Crosses to the door of the drawing-room.) But I count on your absolute discretion.

NORMAN.

You may count.

SIR FREDERICK.

Meanwhile kindly tell me if you've seen Miss Dyer.

NORMAN.

She was here a moment ago—she went to the drawing-room.

SIR FREDERICK, ceremoniously.

Thank you.

Exit Sir FREDERICK to the drawing-room.

NORMAN, alone.

He wants to tell her to keep an eye on Mildred. Ah, Miss Dyer's eye!

Re-enter MILDRED through the ante-room from the right.

MILDRED.

May I come back?

NORMAN.

Yes, but I mayn't speak to you.

MILDRED, coming down.

And mayn't I speak to you?

NORMAN.

What good will it do if I can't answer?

MILDRED.

We understand each other without words. Was your father very dreadful?

NORMAN.

Quite ghastly! But I've accepted his conditions.

MILDRED.

And what are they?

NORMAN.

To wait the four years.

MILDRED, dolorous.

Ah! (After a moment.) Well, I accept them.

NORMAN.

I can't tell you what I feel when I hear you say that —because I've promised not to. But I may feel it all the same, mayn't I?

Re-enter Miss DYER from the drawing-room.

MILDRED, pointed.

I'm not quite sure you ought!

MISS DYER.

My dear Mildred, I've opened the new piano for you. I think you'd better go and try it.

NORMAN, privately to MILDRED.

Miss Dyer's eye!

MILDRED, in the same way.

It's better than Miss Dyer's ear! (Then aloud.) What shall I play?

NORMAN.

"When we two parted—in silence and tears!"

MILDRED.

I know the air.

Exit MILDRED to the drawing-room.

MISS DYER, looking at NORMAN sentimentally, and warbling the rest of the Byronic quotation.

"Half broken-hearted—to sever for years!"

NORMAN, at the door of the library.

Only for four!

Exit NORMAN to the library.

MISS DYER, alone, plaintive.

He hates me when I call her away from him. It's hard to be obliged to make him hate me! (Then seeing Mrs. VIBERT, who has appeared in the ante-room from the left, and stands there looking at her.) A lady—a stranger?

Enter Mrs. VIBERT, who slowly comes down.

MRS. VIBERT.

If I venture to come in unannounced, I'll tell you presently why.

MISS DYER.

In these soft September days, in the depths of Devonshire, we leave everything open.

MRS. VIBERT.

I like open houses—and open hearts! And I'm not dangerous, though you look at me as if I were a gipsy.

MISS DYER, mystified, fluttered, but responsive; having surveyed her charming appearance and French dress, and taken in her cosmopolitan air.

Not the kind that tell one's fortune!

MRS. VIBERT.

I've walked across your park—your park is lovely.

MISS DYER.

It's not mine—I wish it were!

MRS. VIBERT, gay.

Oh, I know where I am—I know your facts! (Then as Miss DYER slightly starts.) Don't be frightened: I'm sure you've no secrets.

MISS DYER, with superiority.

A woman who has no secrets must be rather a frump!

MRS. VIBERT.

Not so great a frump as the woman who doesn't find them out! What I meant is that I know about Beechingham Manor—I've come to see it.

MISS DYER.

Are you under the impression that it's shown?

MRS. VIBERT.

Not in general; but (with a flattering, insinuating smile) *you* could be my cicerone.

MISS DYER.

I'm not quite sure I ought! I haven't the honour of knowing—

MRS. VIBERT.

In the least who I am? *Je vous tombe des nues*, precisely.

MISS DYER, pleased.

I do know French!

MRS. VIBERT.

Let me tell you in plain English that I'm a possible tenant for Clere.

MISS DYER.

The dowerhouse?

MRS. VIBERT.

At the other end of the park. I heard it was to let, I'm in search of a quiet refuge in the country, I came over this morning from a little watering-place on the Cornish border, I looked at the whole thing and fell in love with it.

MISS DYER.

It's a sweet little nest.

MRS. VIBERT, who has looked about her.

And in the shadow of such pleasant things!

MISS DYER.

I do what I can here, but I fear I can't boast of my material.

MRS. VIBERT.

Whatever your material, it appeals to me, since I'm to be a neighbour: it may make a great difference to me. So I sent the agent away and just wandered across—to explore and to propose.

MISS DYER, with a slight movement.

To propose?

MRS. VIBERT, laughing.

Oh not in the sense *you* naturally attach—! But I'm

a very frank, direct person—I like to stand up to my landlord.

MISS DYER.

It's a pity Sir Frederick's so shy!

MRS. VIBERT.

That's perhaps only with you! May I inquire if he's at home?

MISS DYER.

He was in the drawing-room a moment ago—he went into the garden.

MRS. VIBERT.

Could you kindly cause him to be informed that his tenant would like to see him?

MISS DYER.

What name shall I have the honour to give?

MRS. VIBERT.

Please simply say a lady—to treat! (Exit Miss DYER through the ante-room, to the right. Mrs. VIBERT, alone, looks round her.) It *is* charming, and if I wanted to reconnoitre I've succeeded beyond my hope.

Re-enter MILDRED, without perceiving her, from the drawing-room.

MILDRED, weary, impatient, while Mrs. VIBERT goes up to look further.

The new piano's deadly flat — everything, to-day, is deadly flat. (Seeing Mrs. VIBERT; to herself.) Ah no, *she's* not!

MRS. VIBERT, seeing MILDRED and coming down again.

Excuse me, mademoiselle—while I wait for your father.

MILDRED, blank.

My father? I have no father.

MRS. VIBERT, looking at her with compassion and admiration.

Forgive my mistake! It's a pity: he would have adored you!

MILDRED, simply, wonderingly, yet with a certain suggestion of mistrust.

And I have no mother.

MRS. VIBERT.

Then you must let *me* be kind to you.

MILDRED.

I don't know who you are, madam!

MRS. VIBERT.

I'm nobody yet, but to-morrow (curtseying to her with indulgent jocularity) I shall be your neighbour! (MILDRED formally returns her curtsey and passes back to the door of the drawing-room, where she stands looking at her.) So we shall meet again. (To herself.) *That* will be up-hill!

Re-enter Miss DYER through the ante-room from the right.

MISS DYER, to Mrs. VIBERT.

Sir Frederick tells me he'll come to you. (To MILDRED, passing her arm round her.) And you, my child, you'll come to me. We'll go out!

Exeunt MILDRED and Miss DYER to the drawing-room.

MRS. VIBERT, alone.

Now then, my dear, toe the mark!

Re-enter Sir FREDERICK through the ante-room, from the right, approaching Mrs. VIBERT with businesslike civility.

SIR FREDERICK, inquiring.

Madam?

MRS. VIBERT, after a moment.

That's not what you called me of old!

SIR FREDERICK startled by her voice, staring an instant, then utterly surprised.

Good God—Eleanor!

MRS. VIBERT.

Frederick!

SIR FREDERICK.

You rise before me—after all these years—like the ghost of my youth!

MRS. VIBERT.

And you stand before me, my friend, like the hope of my future!

SIR FREDERICK.

You're not, perhaps, so young; and yet you're somehow—so new!

MRS. VIBERT.

I've been revised and improved: I'm the latest edition! Let me reassure you—I'm better reading than I was.

SIR FREDERICK.

Ah, don't speak of what you were!

MRS. VIBERT.

Why shouldn't I? When I see *you* again, I'm not ashamed of it!

SIR FREDERICK, after a moment.

What has led you to take steps to see me again?

MRS. VIBERT.

Everything else that I have seen!

SIR FREDERICK.

Eleanor, have you come to put your hand on me?

MRS. VIBERT.

To lean on you, do you mean? As your ivy there leans on your wall! The wall can bear it.

SIR FREDERICK.

Oh, I'm not stone; and everything is different now.

MRS. VIBERT.

Different indeed—that's exactly why I've come. (After an instant.) My husband's dead.

SIR FREDERICK.

Not lately, I see, for you're not in weeds.

MRS. VIBERT.

It doesn't matter when. We had wholly ceased to meet.

SIR FREDERICK.

That was the case even before I knew you.

MRS. VIBERT.

Have I forgotten my circumstances then? They were almost my exoneration. He was living abroad, but after you and I parted, after you went to India, he came home. Then *I* went abroad—to escape him. But I never really escaped him—till the day he died.

SIR FREDERICK.

What a history! What has become of your son?

MRS. VIBERT.

My son's alive. Him we *can't* escape.

SIR FREDERICK takes her hand and, bending over it, raises it to his lips.

We don't desire to! (He walks away a few steps and comes back.) Did your husband ever learn?

MRS. VIBERT.

He learnt everything.

SIR FREDERICK.

And what did he do?

MRS. VIBERT.

He made me pay.

SIR FREDERICK, vague, helpless, compassionate.

Dearest friend—!

MRS. VIBERT.

I'm paying still.

SIR FREDERICK.

Yet Claude's now of an age to be something of a compensation: he's—

MRS. VIBERT, as he hesitates; with a sad smile.

I remember! He's twenty.

SIR FREDERICK.

And where is he?

MRS. VIBERT.

Half an hour ago he was at that charming old house of yours that I want to take.

SIR FREDERICK.

Does *he* know?

MRS. VIBERT.

He knows nothing.

SIR FREDERICK, after an instant.

My charming old house, I surmise, has only been your pretext.

MRS. VIBERT.

It may have been my pretext, but I want it to be my home!

SIR FREDERICK.

Close to mine, Eleanor, at this time of day?

MRS. VIBERT.

The closer the better; and just because it *is* this time. It wouldn't have done of old.

SIR FREDERICK.

Yes, you were all for appearances then.

MRS. VIBERT.

So I am still. Only now I want them to correspond with the facts!

SIR FREDERICK.

What do you call the facts?

MRS. VIBERT.

Isn't the principal one that at last we've found each other?

SIR FREDERICK.

I've taken for granted you'd avoid me.

MRS. VIBERT.

I should have avoided you twenty years ago! You drew me back to England.

SIR FREDERICK.

You had kept away?

MRS. VIBERT.

For nineteen years. When I went abroad after you went to India, it was to live expatriated. But when I heard you had come back—

SIR FREDERICK.

You came back yourself? I've been at home two years.

MRS. VIBERT.

Yes, but you've been buried.

SIR FREDERICK.

And you're digging me up!

MRS. VIBERT.

By the oddest chance! I came down to Trecothick, which is pretty and quiet—and cheap, and happened to see there, in an agent's window, a photograph of your delightful lodge, which took my fancy so that I made inquiries about it. I learned it belonged to you—a fact that, after my first astonishment, made me like it still better. I came over to see it, and then I came over to see its master. (Pleadingly.) He won't close its door to me?

SIR FREDERICK.

How your early tone—the one that used to stir me—falls upon my ear!

MRS. VIBERT.

Not surely *then* the tone of supplication. I never asked you for anything.

SIR FREDERICK, after a silence.

Never.

MRS. VIBERT.

Give me the benefit of that to-day. I'm weary of the dusty roads, of effort and exile and motion; weary of going from pillar to post and of all the beaten tracks and haunted corners of the Continent. For pity's sake, let me sink down to rest in that sheltered nook. Let me take my stand there on the firm ground of your friendship, and I shall find a new interest in life.

SIR FREDERICK.

Why should you want a "new" interest, if you've a son of twenty?—assuming, that is, that he's what he ought to be.

MRS. VIBERT, after a moment.

He *is* what he ought to be! But it's exactly for him that I want it! I ask of you nothing for him; I only ask you to know him.

SIR FREDERICK.

Since he can't know *me?* Be it so! But how strange it seems for you and him to have been so absent all these years only to be so intensely present now!

MRS. VIBERT, smiling.

You can't say we've worried you!

SIR FREDERICK.

You've spoiled me!

MRS. VIBERT.

By letting you suppose us in our graves? Thank you.

SIR FREDERICK.

Eleanor, I feel as if *I* had been in my grave! It's *I* who have come to life. But when you propose yourself as a tenant, how can I have a relation of business with you?

MRS. VIBERT.

Les bons comptes font les bons amis! Your house isn't dear, with your society thrown in.

SIR FREDERICK.

I should have to throw in more than my own.

MRS. VIBERT.

Ah? (After a moment.) Have you married again?

SIR FREDERICK.

For what do you take me? I've accepted a more thankless charge.

MRS. VIBERT.

You, my dear friend? I don't believe it!

SIR FREDERICK.

You don't do me justice! I had a friend who did, when, two years ago, in dying, he placed his only daughter in my hands.

MRS. VIBERT.

The young lady I saw just now?

SIR FREDERICK.

You saw her?

MRS. VIBERT.

She was here a moment. She's lovely.

SIR FREDERICK.

She's good, clever, considerate; but she makes me less independent.

MRS. VIBERT.

You mean that she can't meet such a person as me?

SIR FREDERICK.

Dear Eleanor—you're terrible! (Embarrassed.) Your grace, your charming forms, are on the contrary just the sort of thing she ought to have near her.

MRS. VIBERT.

I see: if they could only be found in some other person! Perhaps they *are* found in the lady who received me.

SIR FREDERICK.

Miss Dyer, Mildred's companion? Oh, *that* woman's an idiot!

MRS. VIBERT.

So are most women! I can understand that your little inmate should be a great responsibility.

SIR FREDERICK.

So great that it's a comfort to gossip to you about it.

MRS. VIBERT, smiling.

I ought to have come sooner!

SIR FREDERICK.

You might have prevented my son from falling in love with her.

MRS. VIBERT.

Your children are naturally susceptible! I was waiting for *you* to speak first of this one.

SIR FREDERICK.

Thanks for your delicacy.

MRS. VIBERT.

I suppose he too can't meet me.

SIR FREDERICK, after an instant.

He can meet, I take it, any one I expect him to meet, and I look to him to consider that he has caused me embarrassment enough without causing me any more.

MRS. VIBERT, irrepressible, sincere.

Frederick—you're a pearl!

SIR FREDERICK, blank, guarded an instant.

Eh?

MRS. VIBERT.

I'll explain later: I've much to explain! (Then after a moment.) Mr. Byng wants to marry—

SIR FREDERICK.

His father's ward. So he pretends to have discovered.

MRS. VIBERT.

Has the young lady a fortune?

SIR FREDERICK.

A very solid fortune—and that's exactly why.

MRS. VIBERT, vague.

Why he wants to marry her?

SIR FREDERICK.

Why I won't hear of it. Luckily he's off to India.

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MRS. VIBERT.

He's in the service?

SIR FREDERICK.

The Civil, and doing well. He has gone in for his father's career, and I expect him to improve on it.

MRS. VIBERT, smiling, deprecating.

Dear friend, to improve on his father—!

SIR FREDERICK.

Oh, Norman's very sharp!

MRS. VIBERT, after an instant.

So I infer. When does he start?

SIR FREDERICK.

I wanted to pack him off this evening, but I've given him a respite.

MRS. VIBERT, arch.

Procrastinator! (After another instant.) The young lady's *very* rich?

SIR FREDERICK.

Seven thousand a year.

MRS. VIBERT, with a suppressed movement.

My dear man, it's grave. (Then after a further pause.) If your son were to go this evening he *wouldn't* meet me.

SIR FREDERICK.

When you put it that way you humiliate me.

MRS. VIBERT.

Does it humiliate you to be helped? I only want to help you.

SIR FREDERICK, after an instant.

There *ought* to be a clever woman about!

MRS. VIBERT.

It has been known to make a difference! If Mr. Byng goes to-night there's another person he won't meet.

SIR FREDERICK.

Another person?

MRS. VIBERT, after an instant.

His brother.

SIR FREDERICK, considering.

That perhaps would be better.

MRS. VIBERT.

Does it "humiliate" you?

SIR FREDERICK.

You do what you like with me. Where is he, the other person?

MRS. VIBERT.

I left him in the park; he walked most of the way with me.

SIR FREDERICK.

If I were to go out there should I see him?

MRS. VIBERT.

Perfectly—unless they've turned back. But they were fascinated with this house; it's better than Clere.

SIR FREDERICK.

"They"? Who's with him?

MRS. VIBERT, after an hesitation.

My dear Frederick, his tutor.

SIR FREDERICK.

Has he a "tutor"—at twenty?

MRS. VIBERT.

What they call abroad a preceptor—with young princes a governor.

SIR FREDERICK.

But Claude isn't a young prince.

MRS. VIBERT.

Far enough from it! He has none the less inspired a loyalty, a devotion, on the part of a friend who has stood by us, in strange lands, all these years, who has helped to make a man of him, as a poor mother alone can't do, and to whom he's inevitably much attached.

SIR FREDERICK.

I should like to see his devoted friend.

MRS. VIBERT.

For God's sake don't be jealous of him! (Then in another tone.) You may see Captain Lurcher in the park.

SIR FREDERICK.

Captain Lurcher? Is he English?

MRS. VIBERT.

He has come back to find out. (Laughing.) So have Claude and I. You must pronounce!

SIR FREDERICK, making a short movement toward the ante-room, as if to look; then checking himself and coming down.

How you've all your old power!

MRS. VIBERT.

My old power is simply my old affection.

SIR FREDERICK, passing his hand over his eyes and head.

Eleanor, you're wonderful! You bewilder me—you've set all my life vibrating! I want to pull myself together —I want to think.

MRS. VIBERT.

Think, think: the more you do so the better perhaps for *me!* Leave me a little if you find me so agitating. I too shall be glad to recover myself, for our encounter has ploughed me up.

SIR FREDERICK.

I've offered you no hospitality — I'll send you some tea. And Miss Dyer to make it.

MRS. VIBERT.

I shall be grateful for tea, but I won't monopolise Miss Dyer. Leave me alone a moment—leave me with my shaken nerves.

SIR FREDERICK.

I'm rather afraid to be alone with mine!

MRS. VIBERT.

Go and find my companions then. Speak to them, bring them in. And bring me your answer.

SIR FREDERICK.

My answer?

MRS. VIBERT.

About the lodge.

SIR FREDERICK, from the ante-room.

In five minutes.

Exit Sir FREDERICK to the left.

MRS. VIBERT, alone.

The lodge is mine—and *he's* mine! (Looking embracingly round her.) I think it's *all* mine—the dream come true: peace and security, credit and rest, quiet waters and flowery pastures. Dear old rural, respectable England, take me again to your bosom! (Enter FROST through the ante-room, from the left, with the tea-tray, which he places on a small table, afterwards going out. Mrs. VIBERT approaches the table and, seated by it, pours herself out a cup.) The tea's sure to be good. (Having raised the cup to her lips.) Excellent! (Re-enter from the library NORMAN BYNG, whom she immediately sees as he stands arrested on perceiving her. To herself.) Ah, *that* sort! (To NORMAN, graciously.) Have you come for your tea? Perhaps you'll let me give it to you.

NORMAN.

I won't incommode you; and, to my loss, I don't drink tea.

MRS. VIBERT.

You don't incommode me if you happen to be Mr. Byng.

NORMAN.

I plead guilty to that misfortune.

MRS. VIBERT.

I hope I shan't make the case worse by mentioning that I'm your father's tenant.

NORMAN, who has crossed to the door of the drawing-room; with his hand on the knob.

Not worse for *him.* (Gives her a still more searching look, which she returns; then goes into the drawing-room.)

MRS. VIBERT, alone.

So that's the son, and that's the suitor? He's not a trifle. But neither are seven thousand a year! (Finishes her tea standing.) He must go to-night!

Re-enter SIR FREDERICK through the ante-room from the left.

SIR FREDERICK.

I don't see your companions.

MRS. VIBERT.

It doesn't matter; I'll present them to-morrow. They've returned to the lodge; let them stay there.

SIR FREDERICK, demurring.

Ah, my dear friend, there are difficulties!

MRS. VIBERT.

I know there are. (After a moment.) Mr. Byng doesn't like me.

SIR FREDERICK, blank.

My son? What does he know about you?

MRS. VIBERT.

He was here—he saw me. I can't say I please him.

SIR FREDERICK, dry.

I neither choose my friends nor drop them to please my son.

MRS. VIBERT, philosophic.

You can't please every one! But trust me to bring him round.

SIR FREDERICK.

I don't think you'll have the chance.

MRS. VIBERT, struck.

In the time?

SIR FREDERICK, hesitating, considering.

Eleanor—!

MRS. VIBERT, as she watches him; abrupt, touching, irresistible.

Frederick — don't turn me away! (Goes back to the tea-table and pours him out a cup, handing it to him deftly, gently, without looking at him, as a matter of course; almost as if in her own house. He takes the cup from her in silence, in a kind of charmed mechanical submission, drinks it while she waits and returns it to her, on which she places it back on the tray.)

SIR FREDERICK.

The lodge is yours!

MRS. VIBERT, taking his hand and raising it, holding it to her lips in silent satisfaction; then as she releases it.

It's better, after all, that they shouldn't meet to-night.

SIR FREDERICK, vague.

That they shouldn't meet—?

MRS. VIBERT.

Your son—and mine!

SIR FREDERICK.

What is there gained—if they're to meet to-morrow?

MRS. VIBERT.

It's better that they shouldn't meet even to-morrow. (Smiling.) We'll hide!

SIR FREDERICK.

From what?

MRS. VIBERT.

From Mr. Byng's stony stare!

SIR FREDERICK.

His stony stare? (Looking at his watch.) Mr. Byng's going!

MRS. VIBERT, smiling.

You *can* act! Well, it *is* better, if you really wish to nip in the bud any projects he may have formed—!

SIR FREDERICK.

In regard to Mildred? I hope you don't question the reality of my disapproval.

MRS. VIBERT.

Heaven forbid I should question! But the world may —the world's so charitable! The way to be right with the world is to separate the young people on the spot.

SIR FREDERICK.

Well, I had only given him five days.

MRS. VIBERT.

Do you remember what five days—when we got them —could be for *us?*

SIR FREDERICK.

The more I see you the more I remember!

MRS. VIBERT, sententious.

If we had had more resolution our case to-day would be simpler.

SIR FREDERICK, prompt.

We must make the best of our case to-day! I'll see Norman immediately.

MRS. VIBERT.

I'll leave you to see him. May I take possession?

SIR FREDERICK, after kissing her hand exactly as she has kissed his.

You *have* taken possession! Let me start you on your way.

MRS. VIBERT.

I mustn't devour your time—you'll need it for your son.

SIR FREDERICK.

I hate to let you go alone.

MRS. VIBERT.

Then let me wait till you've parted with Mr. Byng. Don't stand on ceremony—I mean, of course, with *me!*

SIR FREDERICK, laughing.

Coquette!

MRS. VIBERT, laughing.

Ah, not now!

SIR FREDERICK, opening the door of the library.

Please pass in here.

MRS. VIBERT, at the door.

Be mild!

Exit Mrs. VIBERT.

SIR FREDERICK, alone.

Mild? I shall be firm! (Rings the bell.) She clears things up—but I daresay I shall have a battle. (Re-enter FROST through the ante-room from the left.) Please ask Mr. Byng to speak to me.

FROST.

He's in the drawing-room, sir.

Exit FROST to the drawing-room.

SIR FREDERICK.

If it's to be a battle, there's all the more reason! (Re-enter FROST, and holds the door of the drawing-room open for NORMAN. Re-enter NORMAN.) Frost, wait a moment.

NORMAN.

I'm at your service, father.

SIR FREDERICK.

I must test that statement. (To Frost.) Pack a few things for Mr. Byng—for immediate use. (Frost bows and goes out through the ante-room to the left. Sir Frederick looks again at his watch.) There's a fast train to town at 5.45. Can you catch it?

NORMAN.

Catch it! Then you *do* turn me out?

SIR FREDERICK.

I've considered more fully, and I see my duty clearer. You've half an hour.

NORMAN.

It's liberal of you, sir, to give me "half an hour" to start for the other side of the globe—for arduous work, for a detestable climate, for an absence of many years!

SIR FREDERICK.

If you'll give me your word of honour that you wish to linger for *me*, I'll withdraw my pressure on the instant!

NORMAN, after a moment.

It's not altogether for you.

SIR FREDERICK.

Thank you. Frost is putting up what's most necessary, and the day after to-morrow I'll join you in London

with the rest of your luggage and remain with you till you leave England.

NORMAN, in the same tone his father has just used.

Thank you. May I at least take leave of Miss Stanmore?

SIR FREDERICK.

Is it extravagant to appeal to you not to?

NORMAN.

I don't ask it for myself, however much I may wish it. I ask it for *her*.

SIR FREDERICK, with a gesture of irritated acceptance.

I'll send her to you, and I'll make your arrangements.

Exit Sir FREDERICK through the ante-room to the right.

NORMAN, alone.

Damn my arrangements! What has happened, what has made him wheel round? (Reflecting; much struck.) Who was that lady, installed there (glancing round, as if for a trace of her, at the tea-table) and with what do I dimly connect her? He was warning me a while ago against early ties. Is *she* an early tie? (As MILDRED reappears.) Oh, early ties are blest!

Re-enter MILDRED through the ante-room from the right.

MILDRED.

Coming in from the garden I meet your father, and he tells me to come and speak to you. What strange thing has happened?

NORMAN.

Exactly what I'm wondering! He orders me off the premises, and I'm only waiting for the dogcart.

MILDRED.

Then we haven't even our five days?

NORMAN.

We have only our five minutes. Dearest, be strong!

MILDRED.

Why has he changed? (Thinking.) Norman, who was that lady?

NORMAN.

Did *you* see her? She told me she was his tenant.

MILDRED.

His tenant?

NORMAN.

For the lodge. He's letting it.

MILDRED.

And who were those men?

NORMAN.

What men?

MILDRED.

Two gentlemen I met by the lake: a strange young man, younger than you, with another—still stranger!—a good deal older.

NORMAN.

"Tenants" too, no doubt! If there are so many, I must go off to make room for them!

MILDRED.

I felt it hanging over us. We must have courage.

NORMAN.

I have it for myself; but how can I have it for you?

MILDRED.

Oh, I'm not a coward! You can trust me.

NORMAN.

I do trust you: that's a blessing!

MILDRED.

I feel as if the day had darkened!

NORMAN.

So do I—and that makes it doubly cruel for me to go.

MILDRED.

Never mind—if we've perfect faith!

NORMAN.

Do you know how you can show me the perfection of yours? Call for me, *cable* to me, if there's danger.

MILDRED.

Danger?

NORMAN.

I don't know what it is—I only seem to scent it in the air. At the first hint of it I'll come back to you, at no matter what sacrifice. Do you understand? It's a solemn vow.

MILDRED.

I've so much ambition for you that I shall have to be in a very tight place before I put you to such a disadvantage.

NORMAN.

Well, you *may* be in a very tight place!

MILDRED, after an instant.

Then I'll cable! (They separate as FROST reappears.)

Re-enter FROST through the ante-room from the left.

FROST.

The dogcart is at the door, sir.

Exit FROST. NORMAN takes MILDRED in his arms and holds her for an instant in a silent, close embrace; then he goes quickly up. Exit NORMAN through the ante-room, to the left.

MILDRED, alone, looking round her.

The day *has* darkened!

Re-enter Miss DYER from the drawing-room.

MISS DYER.

Where is Mr. Byng?

MILDRED.

Gone to India.

MISS DYER.

Without bidding *me* good-bye?

MILDRED.

So it would seem!

MISS DYER, disconcerted, wounded.

I'm not quite sure he ought!

MILDRED.

Dear Miss Dyer, there are many things we shall not be quite sure of now!

Re-enter from the library Mrs. VIBERT, who stands a moment, looking from MILDRED to Miss DYER.

MRS. VIBERT, graciously, to Miss DYER.

Would you kindly let Sir Frederick know I'm ready?

Miss DYER bows and goes out through the ante-room to the left, and MILDRED is left confronted with Mrs. VIBERT.

MRS. VIBERT, in the same tone.

You look as if you'd lost something.

MILDRED, after an instant.

I've lost a friend.

MRS. VIBERT.

Then we must give you another.

Re-enter Sir FREDERICK through the ante-room from the left.

SIR FREDERICK.

I'm quite at your service.

MRS. VIBERT.

Then inaugurate me!

She takes Sir FREDERICK's arm; they pass up together, and MILDRED also goes up a few steps and looks after them. Exeunt Sir FREDERICK and Mrs. VIBERT through the ante-room to the left, while MILDRED comes down.

MILDRED, with confirmed alarm, staring before her and dropping upon a sofa.

She *is* the danger!

ACT SECOND

The hall at Beechingham on Christmas Eve, with decorations of evergreen and holly. Through the wide window which looks out from the ante-room the wintry landscape glooms through the gathering dusk. Lamplight and firelight within; the Christmas blaze from a tall fireplace on the right, beyond the door of the drawing-room.

CLAUDE VIBERT stands with his back to the fire and a little toy in his hands, a wooden figure that jerks up its legs and arms when pulled by a string. On the other side of the stage sits Miss DYER, beside a table heaped with Christmas packages and trifles, occupied in attaching to small objects the bits of ribbon by which they may be tied to a Christmas tree. Up at the window, with her back presented, stands MILDRED, looking out into the cold twilight, but turning away and coming down with a restless, preoccupied air as CLAUDE speaks.

CLAUDE.

If I were in the least like Bluebeard, I should venture to think Miss Stanmore like Sister Anne! She's always looking out of windows.

MISS DYER.

I'm not quite sure she ought! Perhaps she's watching for the Captain: it's time indeed he should turn up.

MILDRED.

I didn't even know Captain Lurcher has been away.

MISS DYER.

For a whole week in London — on very important business.

MILDRED.

I haven't missed him.

MISS DYER, gay.

Well, *I* have! But I've been in correspondence with him.

CLAUDE, with mock reproachfulness.

I'm not quite sure you ought!

MISS DYER.

It's a great secret, but you'll see when he comes.

CLAUDE, to MILDRED.

Doesn't that make you want him to come?

MILDRED, completely detached.

Not a bit!

MISS DYER.

He must be in time for our great occasion — our Christmas tree, after dinner, for the village children; and the old-fashioned dance, after that, for the dear simple people. We've cleared the billiard-room—it has the best floor.

CLAUDE.

So that poor Sir Frederick has had to go without his game.

MISS DYER.

It hasn't mattered, without Captain Lurcher to play with him.

CLAUDE.

Yes, Sir Frederick, at least, has missed the Captain. The Captain always lets himself be beaten.

MISS DYER.

He has such tact—I think he does it on purpose.

MILDRED.

He may be beaten once too often to like it.

CLAUDE.

Surely not by Sir Frederick!

MILDRED, after an instant, turning away.

No, not by Sir Frederick.

MISS DYER, to CLAUDE; mysterious, important.

I don't mind telling *you* my secret. I wrote to him to buy some more toys for our tree!

CLAUDE, laughing.

What dark machinations! But you were quite right. Too many Christmas cards with quotations from the poets; and, for the dear simple people, as you say, not enough charming objects like this. (Playing with his toy.)

MISS DYER.

What good are the charming objects if you worry them to death? Go and finish dressing the tree.

CLAUDE.

I'll go like a shot if Miss Stanmore will come with me. Miss Stanmore, will you come and help me?

MILDRED.

Excuse me, Mr. Vibert—I'm quite out of it.

CLAUDE flings down his toy and looks at her a moment; then gentle, pleading, persuasive.

Won't you do it for the poor little children?

MILDRED, after an instant.

Well! for the poor little children!

MISS DYER, to CLAUDE, rising and giving him a number of her packets of sweets.

Then please take these. (To MILDRED.) And you take these.

CLAUDE, with eager courtesy, intercepting the objects offered to MILDRED.

I'll carry them for Miss Stanmore. (He bows for MILDRED to pass first, and they go up together. Exeunt MILDRED and CLAUDE through the ante-room to the right.)

MISS DYER, alone.

How nice he is, with his little Frenchified jokes and his little foreign ceremonies! But what has got into *her* at this sociable time? She, alas, is *not* sociable! However, if she hasn't confidence in me, how can she have

it in any one? (Then as Captain LURCHER appears.) Ah, the Captain at last! (Enter Captain LURCHER through the ante-room from the left.) Welcome back, you brilliant fraud!

LURCHER, in travelling dress, an Inverness cape and gloves; placing on Miss DYER'S table a considerable parcel.

Good day, sweet child of nature. Had you given me up?

MISS DYER.

I shall never give you up!

LURCHER.

I've brought you a museum of curiosities—enough to stock a bazaar. And also (taking a small paper of bonbons from the pocket of his cape) a little private parcel for your own consumption.

MISS DYER, with the bonbons.

Chocolate creams? You know the way to a woman's heart!

LURCHER.

Not down her throat, surely!

MISS DYER, with the larger parcel.

Mildred and Mr. Claude shall suspend these to the branches.

LURCHER.

And where *are* those interesting young people?

MISS DYER.

In the billiard-room, dressing the tree.

LURCHER.

With no one else?

MISS DYER.

With no one else.

LURCHER, gratified.

Christmas is a great invention!

MISS DYER.

It's not appreciated as much as one could wish by Mrs. Vibert. She has not been here to lend a hand.

LURCHER.

She doesn't lend — she borrows. Sir Frederick's at Clere; I stopped there on my way from the station.

MISS DYER.

Precisely; he lunched there: he went over at eleven o'clock.

LURCHER, laughing.

Is that the hour he lunches?

MISS DYER.

It's the hour he has started — every day of your absence.

LURCHER, after an instant.

And when has he come back?

MISS DYER.

Very late for dinner.

LURCHER, after another instant.

Most irregular. But if Claude has made up for it—

MISS DYER.

He has regularly lunched here.

LURCHER.

Coming also at eleven?

MISS DYER.

Coming at ten.

LURCHER.

That's quite as it should be. But there's something else that isn't.

MISS DYER.

Pray, what's that?

LURCHER.

Your deplorable inaction. You disappoint me!

MISS DYER.

I always disappoint wickedness! (Then as if to change the subject.) Is London as shocking as ever?

LURCHER.

London bored me. (Gallant.) My personal joys are here.

MISS DYER.

You're a mass of corruption! Isn't Mrs. Vibert coming over now?

LURCHER.

Very soon, I gather; she's to drive across with Sir Frederick. By why do you worry about *her?* Mrs. Vibert's not our model.

MISS DYER.

She's mine—for clothes!

LURCHER, flattering.

You've not the need of them that she has! (Then as she flirts away a little.) Will you listen to me?

MISS DYER.

I'm not quite sure I ought!

LURCHER.

That will make it all the nicer. We might do so much together! Union is strength.

MISS DYER.

Strength for what?

LURCHER.

For success! The making of the most charming young couple in the world—which young couple would, by the same token, be the making of *us*.

MISS DYER.

Your theories are complicated!

LURCHER.

I address them to a fine intelligence. You'll win my eternal gratitude by persuading Miss Stanmore—as you have so rare an opportunity of doing—that the best guarantee of her happiness would be a union with that engaging, brilliant boy—one of the most finished, the

most accomplished, the most amiable young men in Europe; a flower of my own assiduous raising, a nature in which art and culture, the highest training and the purest atmosphere, have only added to the bloom of the rarest gifts.

MISS DYER.

Mr. Claude is certainly a perfect gentleman; he does the greatest honour to your care. But must I remind you that Mildred already sees what you call the best guarantee of her happiness in a union with somebody else?

LURCHER.

Mr. Byng? Dear Miss Dyer, Mr. Byng's out of it.

MISS DYER.

Out of what? He's never out of her memory; he's never out of her thoughts.

LURCHER.

Then we must turn him out! Everything's against him.

MISS DYER.

That's why she loves him.

LURCHER.

Yes, you women are so tortuous! I maintain it, Miss Dyer, you're tortuous yourself!

MISS DYER.

It's only because I wriggle in your grasp!

LURCHER.

You've been quiet enough in *other* hands. (After an instant.) Aren't you secretly pledged to Mr. Byng? Aren't you in his interest and, if I may use the expression, in his service? Hasn't he bribed, suborned, corrupted you?

MISS DYER, almost shrieking.

"Corrupted" me?

LURCHER.

It would be a deep regret to me to have to recognise it, for my fondest hope has been that you are free.

MISS DYER, with intensity.

Captain Lurcher, I'm as free as air!

LURCHER.

Then, in the name of all that's bracing, don't let us muddle away a prize! We've a clear field, a high stake, a strong side. Mr. Byng's in the torrid zone.

MISS DYER.

Yes; and he went there with a frigidity!

LURCHER.

Butter packed in ice? Is that the sort of nature you're enslaved to?

MISS DYER as if breaking her chains.

I'm *not* enslaved!

LURCHER.

Then do justice to our opportunity. We should be such common triflers to let it slip that, as a man of the world—for I *am* a man of the world—I should really blush for our form. Why can't we turn Mr. Byng out when we have a first-rate subject to turn in? Our young lady has the plasticity of youth, and we have lots of time—we can work at our leisure.

MISS DYER, participating more and more.

Yes, we've months—we've years.

LURCHER.

Claude's taking, he's brilliant, he's near. Juxtaposition is much.

MISS DYER, quite carried away.

Juxtaposition is everything!

LURCHER.

Last not least, he's in love.

MISS DYER.

That smooths the way.

LURCHER.

And *I* can do something, can't I?

MISS DYER.

Certainly! You're taking too; you're brilliant too—and you're "near."

LURCHER, coming closer.

Very near, Miss Dyer! And I'm also in love!

Passes his arm round her waist.

MISS DYER, disengaging herself with a nervous laugh.

Ah, but you're not twenty!

LURCHER.

Not yet, but I *shall* be! (Pleading.) You won't help me?

MISS DYER.

Yes, if you'll help *me*. (Placing in his hands the parcel that he has deposited on the table.) Take all this, to be hung on the tree. (As he takes the parcel from her he gets hold of one of her hands, hastily kissing it, and goes up. Exit Captain LURCHER through the ante-room to the right. Miss DYER looks at her hand.) He *is* a man of the world; and Mr. Byng didn't behave like one! (Re-enter MILDRED through the ante-room from the right.) The Captain just went to you.

MILDRED.

That's precisely why I came out. (Then abruptly.) Miss Dyer—he's on his way!

MISS DYER, blank; then startled.

Mr. Byng—coming back? (Quite aghast.) When—why?

MILDRED.

I can't tell you when—probably from one day to the other. But I can tell you why. Because I cabled to him.

MISS DYER.

"Cabled?"

MILDRED.

Six weeks ago.

MISS DYER.

And why did you do that?

MILDRED, as Sir FREDERICK and Mrs. VIBERT appear together.

See for yourself!

Enter Sir FREDERICK and Mrs. VIBERT through the ante-room from the left; Mrs. VIBERT dressed for the evening. MILDRED passes up as they come down.

SIR FREDERICK.

May I take the liberty of asking where you're going?

MILDRED.

To my room.

SIR FREDERICK.

And may I take the further liberty of asking for a few words of conversation with you?

MILDRED.

In my room?

SIR FREDERICK.

No—here. (Looking at his watch.) Say in a quarter of an hour.

MILDRED, curtseying.

In a quarter of an hour.

Exit MILDRED through the ante-room to the left.

SIR FREDERICK, to Miss DYER.

Our charming young friend isn't very easy to get hold of. One has to make appointments with her.

MISS DYER, agitated and obsequious.

I'll speak to her about it, Sir Frederick.

Exit Miss Dyer through the ante-room to the left.

MRS. VIBERT.

Your charming young friend hates your charming *old* friend—that's the explanation!

SIR FREDERICK.

That's just why I want to see her.

MRS. VIBERT.

Make allowances for her. I can understand it.

SIR FREDERICK, taking off Mrs. Vibert's cloak.

That's more than *I* can!

Re-enter Captain Lurcher through the ante-room from the right.

LURCHER.

I'm not much use with toys and little candles; my strength is in other directions.

SIR FREDERICK.

Oh, Captain, I know your strength!

LURCHER.

You know my weakness, Sir Frederick. But, fortunately, it won't be exposed so long as the billiard-room is given up to these revels.

SIR FREDERICK, surprised.

Given up?

LURCHER.

Go and see!

SIR FREDERICK, going half-way; then to Mrs. VIBERT.

Won't you come too?

MRS. VIBERT.

Captain Lurcher will say we're inseparable.

LURCHER, laughing.

Oh, I must separate you! (To Sir FREDERICK.) May I ask leave to detain Mrs. Vibert a moment?

MRS. VIBERT, who has crossed to the fire, smiling at Sir FREDERICK.

I've to report on Claude.

LURCHER, to Sir FREDERICK.

Tell him we're overhauling him!

SIR FREDERICK, nodding to the left; alert.

He's there? Be fair to him!

Exit Sir FREDERICK through the ante-room to the right.

LURCHER, while Mrs. VIBERT, with her back to him and one hand on the chimney-piece, stands warming her foot at the fire.

Sir Frederick favours him.

MRS. VIBERT, looking down at the fire.

Sir Frederick likes him.

LURCHER, imperious, abrupt.

Then where's that girl? (As Mrs. VIBERT makes no answer. Where's Miss Stanmore?

MRS. VIBERT.

I'm not Miss Stanmore's keeper.

LURCHER.

She went out of the billiard-room as soon as I came in.

MRS. VIBERT.

Yes, and she went out of this room as soon as *I* came in.

LURCHER.

She's an invidious little wretch!

MRS. VIBERT.

She makes comparisons. She's not an easy conquest.

LURCHER, impatient.

Not even with her guardian to help us? (Then while she again remains silent, still looking down at the fire, he throws off with irritation, a little with the movement of stripping for a "row," his Inverness cape, which he flings upon a sofa; beginning in the same manner to pull off his gloves, which he has worn during the scene with Miss DYER.) You'll permit me to remark that you strike me, during this interesting crisis, as having retired prematurely to your tent.

MRS. VIBERT, turning round slowly, with visible weariness.

I'll permit you to remark anything you like, if in return you'll permit *me* to remark nothing at all!

LURCHER.

On the principle that silence is golden? Common honesty, madam, is more so. You were voluble enough last summer—*then* you had plenty of ideas. Our ship

was in port and our cargo disposed of.—If our ship's in port we're forbidden even to land!

MRS. VIBERT.

On the contrary, I've brought you ashore. You must do the rest for yourself. Remember that I never was in command.

LURCHER.

Which means that you're as much as ever under my orders.

MRS. VIBERT.

So you periodically remind me.

LURCHER.

Your habit of presuming on my indulgence makes it necessary. I place before you the articles of our association.

MRS. VIBERT.

One would think they had been drawn up by a lawyer!

LURCHER.

You know who they were drawn up by! I've always allowed you a latitude; but now I fall back on our agreement. I take my stand on our Act of partnership.

MRS. VIBERT, with sudden, passionate expression.

I despise our Act of partnership!

LURCHER, after an instant.

You never did till you came into this house.

MRS. VIBERT.

You mean I never *said* I did. There are a great many things I never said!

LURCHER.

I see—and at present you can say them! (Then as Mrs. VIBERT leaves the fire and, with a movement of extreme oppression, as of a checked longing to escape, passes slowly across or round the room, while he stands watching her.) You've been deucedly different since you came into this house!

MRS. VIBERT.

You've remained the same, and that will do as well!

LURCHER.

I accept the imputation, as a tribute to my fidelity and consistency. But now I want to see so much virtue a little rewarded!

MRS. VIBERT.

Four months ago your virtue took its chances and reckoned with its risks.

LURCHER.

The lovely day you swam ashore and dropped at Sir Frederick's feet? That was because that night, when we were back at the inn at Trecothick—and, as you perfectly remember, we sat up long and late!—you pledged yourself to do your best, to act your part.

MRS. VIBERT, with rising impatience.

And haven't I done my best? Am I not acting my part from morning till night?

LURCHER.

You've become unconscious of so many things that it's refreshing to find you don't forget the conference which gave so much more intimate a form to our union. I consider that on that occasion the bond of our joint speculation was immeasurably tightened.

MRS. VIBERT, who has moved away and still away from LURCHER during his last two speeches, but whom he has followed round a part of the room; with unspeakable fatigue.

Merciful powers!

LURCHER, authoritative.

Come, madam; our comedy is for others, but our arithmetic is for ourselves! It was on speculation we came here—the frankest and the shrewdest; and the brilliant idea was your own. I adopted it, I embraced it, and now I seem really fonder of it than *you* are! Thanks to your disenchantment, we're wasting our time.

MRS. VIBERT.

I'm not in the least disenchanted.

LURCHER.

You're pacified, I fully recognise, because you're getting your personal returns. But what returns am *I* getting?

MRS. VIBERT.

A harvest of glory! Leave the rest to Claude.

LURCHER.

I've left it—for four months. How much longer do you expect?

MRS. VIBERT.

As much longer as *he* expects. Time is an element in the question. All things considered, we're remarkably secure; we have a liberal margin, and a single act of precipitation may dash this advantage away.

LURCHER.

Perfect—I see. A game of chess on a rainy day, with a nice long nap between the moves! Meanwhile what am I to live on?

MRS. VIBERT.

You've too fine a conception of life!

LURCHER.

Observe that I've had an example to set: which has signally failed, however, to impress my creditors. Pray, what have you done with yours?

MRS. VIBERT, after an instant.

I have none.

LURCHER, surprised, resentful.

You've had money, and kept it?

MRS. VIBERT.

I haven't kept a penny.

LURCHER, blank, disgusted.

Then where's your delicacy?

MRS. VIBERT.

In my infinite patience!

LURCHER, derisive.

The refinement of your egotism. If you're out of the draught yourself, you don't care who sneezes!

MRS. VIBERT.

I suffer when you sneeze in my face. But you needn't talk of draughts—you've never been less exposed.

LURCHER.

I've never been less guaranteed. You suggest that I live in clover; but the clover's over the fence, and I'm confined to the thinnest grass. Miss Stanmore's fortune's the tender herbage, and I haven't had a sniff of that. You trifle with grave realities in affecting to sink, from one day to the other, the memory of the fact that for the last five years I've laboured without a wage.

MRS. VIBERT.

But never without an alternative.

LURCHER, vague.

An alternative?

MRS. VIBERT.

That of simply leaving us.

LURCHER.

Leave the work of my hands and the mainstay of my age? Sacrifice my investment before I've taken a dividend? Claude's my capital, and I continue to nurse it!

MRS. VIBERT.

You were paid with the utmost punctuality the first years you were with us.

LURCHER.

Yes, till your funds ran low. But the habit of devotion was formed.

MRS. VIBERT.

Without prejudice to the habit of calculation.

LURCHER.

Call them together the habit of obedience! I promised your husband on his death-bed that I would cleave to you.

MRS. VIBERT.

Don't speak to me to-day of my husband!

LURCHER.

Why not, when he was the first to speak to me of you? He made us acquainted.

MRS. VIBERT.

He made *me* acquainted—with most of the ill I know.

LURCHER.

You had to take what came; you were so little in a position to choose. So when, in the last year of his

life, I encountered a reverse of fortune; when my old comrade, my dear Vibert, living apart from you, learned that I was looking for a position and *you* were looking for a preceptor to a certain interesting infant (a first-rate, all-round man), he simply, in his perfect command of the situation, nominated to the post his most tried and trusted friend.

MRS. VIBERT.

Trusted, exactly—to poison even my freedom!

LURCHER.

Your freedom was only relative, and the "poison" agreed, wonderful to say, with the delicate constitution of the infant.

MRS. VIBERT.

It was not for that it was prescribed. Your commission had another stamp.

LURCHER.

Sealed orders, to sink the vessel? I spoiled Mr. Vibert's revenge, and spared the precious child. Bettering my instructions, I had the perversity to take a positive fancy to my victim. You know how Claude adores me.

MRS. VIBERT.

I know it from you, but not from him.

LURCHER, after an instant.

Then I advise you to repair that deficiency!

MRS. VIBERT.

I should deprive you of your favourite menace.

LURCHER.

Let me have then, before I lose it, the supreme pleasure of repeating it! On the day our young companion ceases to appreciate the man who has formed his youth, who has fortified his mind and set him, personally and socially, on his feet—

MRS. VIBERT, as he pauses.

Well?

LURCHER.

I shall hold you responsible for the accident.

MRS. VIBERT.

You take a great deal for granted.

LURCHER.

I take all there is!

MRS. VIBERT, after a moment.

What do you require of me—that isn't too base?

LURCHER.

To make a better use of Sir Frederick. I needn't teach you what I mean by that, nor how to meet my views. Bring him up short—show him, so he won't forget it, what we rigidly expect of him.

MRS. VIBERT.

What "we" expect? I never speak to him of *you!*

LURCHER.

Nothing could prove better how constantly you think of me!

MRS. VIBERT, after an instant.

Sir Frederick is to speak to Miss Stanmore this evening.

LURCHER, dubious.

When will it come off?

MRS. VIBERT.

Immediately—on this spot.

LURCHER.

Then I shall expect immediate results. (Picking up his cape and hat.) I'm going over to dress. (Then from the ante-room.) I'll come back to see them!

Exit Captain LURCHER to the left.

MRS. VIBERT, alone.

Ah, yes, you'll come back—and back, and back, and back: as one's evil genius comes, as one's evil passions come, and one's errors, and one's burdens, and one's shames! (Then as she sees Sir FREDERICK: re-enter Sir FREDERICK through the ante-room, from the right.) Have you been with Claude?

SIR FREDERICK.

Helping him, upon my honour, to deck the tree. But as I set it on fire he turned me out.

MRS. VIBERT, smiling and shaking her head slowly and tenderly.

He *shouldn't* turn you out!

SIR FREDERICK.

Oh, I let him play; the poor boy's good for that.

(After an instant.) Eleanor, I really take to him. He has lots of pluck, even though he hasn't been at a rough English school.

MRS. VIBERT.

He has been at the roughest school of all, the school of adversity.

SIR FREDERICK.

Adversity? with *you* to curl his hair!

MRS. VIBERT.

Curling the hair doesn't do much for a young dishonoured head.

SIR FREDERICK.

"Dishonoured," my dear, is extravagant. And you've assured me he doesn't dream—!

MRS. VIBERT.

Claude's deep, he's delicate: who knows what a clever boy dreams? But (after an instant, as if throwing off her fears) we must never let him dream of *that!* We've done him a great wrong, and to the utmost of our power we must make it up to him. I've shown you the way.

SIR FREDERICK.

Yes, I've been trying to learn it. But, somehow, it's hard to my feet!

MRS. VIBERT.

With your position, your authority, your extraordinary advantages? Be a little politic!

SIR FREDERICK.

I see. You want me to strain a point.

MRS. VIBERT.

The virtue of the effort is the virtue of the cause. When one has strained a point to commit a wrong, one can surely do no less to make a reparation. (Coming down after passing up.) Mildred's here—I'll wait.

SIR FREDERICK.

Wait in the drawing-room.

MRS. VIBERT, smiling, at the drawing-room door.

Be very clever!

Exit Mrs. VIBERT.

SIR FREDERICK, alone.

I shall never be as clever as you!

Enter MILDRED through the ante-room from the left.

MILDRED.

You told me you wished to see me.

SIR FREDERICK.

Exactly so, Mildred! I've wished to see you for some time past.

MILDRED.

There would have been no difficulty about it if you hadn't been surrounded with other people.

SIR FREDERICK.

I'm quite aware that you've avoided me in consequence of my interest—so perfectly legitimate—in our charming neighbours; and avoided *them*, more markedly, for the same reason.

MILDRED.

I don't avoid anything or any one, Sir Frederick. I quietly go my way and bide my time.

SIR FREDERICK.

When Mrs. Vibert proposed herself as a tenant for Clere, my first thought was of the pleasant effect such a delightful person would produce at Beechingham.

MILDRED.

I've fully perceived the pleasant effect.

SIR FREDERICK.

Then you might have done more to thank her for it.

MILDRED.

That would have given a false impression.

SIR FREDERICK.

A pleasanter impression than you've succeeded in giving!

MILDRED.

I'm sorry I don't satisfy you, Sir Frederick, because in your house I've had much to be grateful for. But I've gone as far as I can.

SIR FREDERICK, smiling.

On Christmas eve, my dear, one should go a little further! That's why I've taken it as an occasion to speak to you. (A little embarrassed.) It's an occasion, you know, for charitable sentiments, for give and take, and peace on earth, and that sort of thing. You know what I mean—it's a solemn hour!

MILDRED.

I assure you I feel its solemnity.

SIR FREDERICK.

Just so, but you must also feel its cheer! Therefore I'll mention to you that there's a person in the house whom it would give me joy to see you treat a little more in the spirit of the day.

MILDRED, imperturbable.

What person, Sir Frederick?

SIR FREDERICK.

A young man—generous, ambitious, accomplished—in whom I take a particular interest.

MILDRED, after an instant.

Do you insist on my listening to you?

SIR FREDERICK.

I "insist" on nothing—not even on your listening to Claude. I only beg you to let him speak for himself.

MILDRED.

He deserves a better fortune.

SIR FREDERICK.

What fortune, Mildred, could be better—?

MILDRED, interrupting.

Than making love to *me?* He'll tell you when he has had his answer.

SIR FREDERICK, with a nervous laugh.

You reduce things, my dear, to a simplicity—! But that's, in point of fact, what I want. May he have his answer to-night?

MILDRED, after an instant.

Yes, to-night will be a good time.

SIR FREDERICK.

Then I'll send him to you now. (Seeing Miss DYER re-appear: re-enter Miss DYER through the ante-room from the left, dressed for dinner.) Miss Dyer, do me the favour to bestow your company on Mrs. Vibert, who's alone in the drawing-room.

MISS DYER.

For all it's worth, Sir Frederick!

SIR FREDERICK, from the ante-room, genial.

Everything to-night is worth double!

Exit Sir FREDERICK to the right.

MILDRED, who has taken a telegram from her pocket; with decision.

Then this is! (Handing it to Miss DYER.) Read it!

MISS DYER, with the telegram; agitated.

Mr. Byng—*to-night?* How romantic!

MILDRED, her emotion breaking out.

To-night—to-night (then suddenly, as she drops upon a seat, bursting into the hysterical tears that she has with difficulty repressed during the scene with Sir FREDERICK)—at last!

MISS DYER, at the door of the drawing-room.

I won't betray you!

Exit Miss DYER.

MILDRED, springing up and brushing away her tears.

I mustn't betray myself!

Re-enter CLAUDE VIBERT through the ante-room from the right. He comes down quickly and stands for a moment confronted in silence with MILDRED, who has as quickly controlled herself.

CLAUDE.

Sir Frederick tells me I may speak to you, and he knows what I want to say. (MILDRED has turned away from him; he follows her a few steps.) Therefore, perhaps, you've also an idea of it.

MILDRED.

I did give him leave to send you to me.

CLAUDE.

I thank you for that from the bottom of my heart.

MILDRED.

You won't thank me, perhaps, when you know what's at the bottom of mine!

CLAUDE.

Let me know it, Miss Stanmore.

MILDRED.

A very real compassion for you! You're better than the part you play.

CLAUDE.

I play no part, Miss Stanmore, unless it be one to be under the charm—

MILDRED, breaking in.

Of my unmistakable indifference? If my studied bad manners have had a charm for you, you must have been easy to please! I don't apologise for them, because they've been my only, and my necessary, defence. But I haven't expected you to admire them!

CLAUDE.

You're a strange girl, and what I do admire is strangeness—it amuses me, it appeals to me. I delight in originality and in everything that's not—how do you say it in English?—not *banal.*

MILDRED.

What I have to say I shall not say in French, Mr. Vibert, even at the risk of your not understanding it. You were brought here to make love to me, and you've

made it very well, considering how little you had to make it of. But you must stop to-night.

CLAUDE, smiling.

Why to-night?

MILDRED.

Because it's your necessary limit.

CLAUDE.

Don't say that at the very hour when you're more charming, more lovely than I've ever seen you before!

MILDRED.

I say it because you're in danger.

CLAUDE.

Danger only inspires — danger only intoxicates me! I don't pretend not to know I've made no great way with you: I have no illusions on that score. But let me serve my time, let me plead my cause; let me submissively, appealingly (with an insinuating, conciliatory gesture) come a little nearer to you!

MILDRED.

You've a very well-stored mind, and a very well-trained manner, and I do perfect justice to your attitude. But I'm still more struck with that of the people who are behind you—the people who push you on.

CLAUDE, surprised.

The people? what people? (Then smiling.) It's the passion I feel that pushes me on!

MILDRED.

Ah, but who pushes on the passion you feel? You're too nice, you know, and too clever, to be a puppet in vulgar hands.

CLAUDE, blank.

Pray, of what hands do you speak?

MILDRED.

Of the hands that meddle — of the hands I've never touched! (After an instant.) Your mother can assure you I haven't.

CLAUDE, greatly moved.

In what an extraordinary connection to refer to my mother! She's the gentlest and noblest of women.

MILDRED.

I'll believe as much when she proves it.

CLAUDE, vague.

"Proves" it?

MILDRED.

By taking you away from here. (Then after she has gone up; from the ante-room.) Until she does that, Mr. Vibert, you must excuse me if I differ with you, and leave you. (She makes him a formal curtsey. Exit MILDRED to the left.)

CLAUDE, alone, wonderstruck.

She makes my face burn — as if she had lashed it! (Passionately, as Mrs. VIBERT reappears.) Mother!

Re-enter Mrs. VIBERT from the drawing-room. She goes to him, holding out her hands; he takes them, she draws him to her, and he stands for a moment in her embrace, burying his head on her neck. Then he turns from her, brushing away a tear with his pocket-handkerchief.

MRS. VIBERT.

Claude, something has happened to you!

CLAUDE.

Yes, mother—something has happened to me!

MRS. VIBERT.

You're flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone. I guessed it, there, on the instant—it brought me here. You've spoken!

CLAUDE.

Yes, I've spoken; and she has spoken.

MRS. VIBERT.

And what did she say?

CLAUDE, sombre, resentful, reflective.

She said that I'm not a man! (Breaking out suddenly.) Mother, who am I? what am I? why am I not independent?

MRS. VIBERT, smiling sadly.

You would be independent, Claude, if you were to marry Miss Stanmore.

CLAUDE.

I should be something (intently thinking) that I'm determined she shall know I am—shall confess I am! I can't rest under her scorn.

MRS. VIBERT.

The scorn of pretty girls is the spice of courtship! You'll get over that.

CLAUDE.

She shall get over it—that will be more to the purpose. She says I'm put up to such ideas.

MRS. VIBERT.

By me, of course she means.

CLAUDE.

By you and by the Captain.

MRS. VIBERT.

If we desire what you desire, is that such a crime?

CLAUDE.

Mother, I shall force her to think of you more justly.

MRS. VIBERT.

I don't care how she thinks of me!

CLAUDE.

Any wife of mine shall first understand this mother of mine!

MRS. VIBERT.

If once she is your wife, I shall care less than ever.

CLAUDE, after an instant.

You do want it then, intensely?

MRS. VIBERT.

I want it if your own pride, if your own heart is committed to it. But you evidently feel afresh that Miss

Stanmore has (hesitating an instant) prejudices that will not be easy to surmount.

CLAUDE.

That's exactly why I shan't give her up. The way she treats me puts me on my mettle to try to win her more than any other way would do. She's not as other girls are, and, before heaven! I would do anything to make her like me.

MRS. VIBERT.

You give me your word of honour on that?

CLAUDE.

My word of honour.

MRS. VIBERT.

Then let me kiss you.

Re-enter Sir FREDERICK through the ante-room from the right.

SIR FREDERICK.

I don't know what your mother's kissing you for, but I congratulate you at a venture.

MRS. VIBERT, to CLAUDE.

Go and dress for dinner, and I'll explain to Sir Frederick.

Exit CLAUDE through the ante-room to the left.

SIR FREDERICK.

I told him he must dress here; I've sent for his things.

MRS. VIBERT.

It's charming what you do for him. He needs all your

kindness now that he has spoken to Miss Stanmore. He's as much in love as you please!

SIR FREDERICK, looking at her a moment

The real thing?

MRS. VIBERT, smiling.

The genuine article!

SIR FREDERICK, after another instant.

Then it's a horrid bore!

MRS. VIBERT.

Why, it's all we require to be right.

SIR FREDERICK.

When it's a case of squeezing I'd rather be wrong! I can't put Mildred on bread and water.

MRS. VIBERT.

You might put her on her good behaviour. She might sweeten your responsibility, instead of making it bitter. You've twisted your life out of shape to make it fit into hers; you've given up your habits, your traditions, your privacies, your comforts, to carry out a duty you might perfectly have declined. Is she to do nothing in return? to render no homage, to learn no lesson, to make no sacrifice?

SIR FREDERICK, embarrassed.

You forget, Eleanor, that after all — (pausing while he looks at his finger-nails.)

MRS. VIBERT, waiting.

After all?

SIR FREDERICK.

If I sent Norman away I didn't disown him, and that if I challenged him—

MRS. VIBERT, as he pauses again.

Well?

SIR FREDERICK.

I'm extremely fond of him!

MRS. VIBERT.

Yes, I must remember! He's your happy, lawful, acknowledged son, your fortunate pride and joy! (Suddenly, with a change of tone.) Forgive me, Frederick, if I'm jealous, forgive me if I taste to the full the irony of certain differences and contrasts. When I feel what *my* poor boy is, I'm conscious at once of the elevation of his character and of the infirmity of every pretension he may ever make.

SIR FREDERICK.

Believe me when I tell you that I too, in much searching of my conscience, have thought these things over; over and over, in particular, since the words that fell from your lips a while ago, the words about wrong and reparation. It's late in the day to repair; but I have my idea, I have my honest wish. It's not too late for me to have felt the advantage, the magic, of your presence here. (Mrs. VIBERT, looks at him with quickened attention, the dawn of an expectation, while he goes on.) Eleanor, if I may call

you my wife we shall do something to help our son to call me his father.

MRS. VIBERT, strongly, exquisitely moved, but checking herself.

Ah, my only friend!

SIR FREDERICK.

We're not too young, but we're not too old! Life will spread quietly round us, and affection, and rest, and reason; and something we dreamed of in youth will seem at last to have come to us. It won't change everything now, for too much has gone; but it will improve what remains, it will consecrate, it will harmonise.

MRS. VIBERT, shaking her head with mournful dignity and as if with a sense of hindrances and complications.

Are you very sure it will harmonise?

SIR FREDERICK.

Why not, if it makes us *one?* Then, perhaps, on a basis more convenient, we can do something better for Claude than trying to marry him to girls who love somebody else!

MRS. VIBERT, thoughtful.

Something better might be something bad!

SIR FREDERICK, blank.

I don't understand you.

MRS. VIBERT.

I mean it might be something strange! (Then in a different tone.) You make me deeply happy; yet you make me feel that I need to consider.

SIR FREDERICK.

Ah, don't consider too much!

MRS. VIBERT.

As you said to me four months ago, there are particular difficulties.

SIR FREDERICK.

Why, the beauty of this is that it meets and settles them all!

MRS. VIBERT, after an instant.

Do you mean that, as your stepson, frankly adopted and patronised, Claude may have a better prospect with Miss Stanmore?

SIR FREDERICK.

No, honestly; I mean just the contrary: that we needn't think of Miss Stanmore again.

MRS. VIBERT.

How can Claude help thinking of her if he happens to adore her?

SIR FREDERICK.

He'll happen to get over it!

MRS. VIBERT.

I see, I see. (Considering.) By marrying Claude's mother you will have rendered him a service that will absolve you from further exertion.

SIR FREDERICK, after an hesitation, with slight surprise and just visible irritation.

You put it crudely, dear lady. I'm disappointed that I should have to struggle with you.

MRS. VIBERT.

Don't think me ungrateful; all my heart goes out to you! But, as you said just now, we're not juvenile: let us therefore not be superficial. You attach to your generous offer a kind of condition, of stipulation. The price of my position here will be that I shall do my best to keep Miss Stanmore for Mr. Byng.

SIR FREDERICK.

Mr. Byng can do his own keeping; but (dryly) I must be just even to *him*. It's not his fault, after all, if he's my absent and my elder son!

MRS. VIBERT.

I thank you immensely for "elder"!

SIR FREDERICK, still colder.

I can account for your apparently very qualified interest in my proposal only by the supposition that you have hindrances that I am ignorant of. (Studying her face a moment; then breaking down, more tenderly.) Eleanor, you've some trouble you don't tell me!

MRS. VIBERT.

I'll tell you some other time. Meanwhile, if I seem odious, I throw myself on your mercy.

SIR FREDERICK.

I'll show you every mercy if you'll accept me!

MRS. VIBERT, oppressed, nervous, with increasing emotion.

Give me time; I must indeed think! Go and pray for me, and go and dress.

SIR FREDERICK, laughing.

We're agreed that we're not juvenile, but I shall show you that I can dress in five minutes.

Exit Sir FREDERICK through the ante-room to the right.

MRS. VIBERT, alone, dropping again in despair upon a sofa.

Ah, when at last it comes, to be only afraid of it!

Re-enter LURCHER, in evening dress, through the ante-room from the left.

LURCHER.

Has Sir Frederick spoken?

MRS. VIBERT, rising quickly.

Sir Frederick has spoken.

LURCHER.

And what assurance can he give us?

MRS. VIBERT.

He can give us no assurance!

LURCHER.

In spite of your eloquent pressure?

MRS. VIBERT.

You had better try your own!

LURCHER, startled, indignant.

You've given up the case?

MRS. VIBERT, after a silence and with an effort.

I've given up the case.

LURCHER.

Well then, you've had my warning.

MRS. VIBERT, after another silence.

I don't care for your warning now!

LURCHER, staring and insolent.

"Now"? You're not dead yet! (Then as if divining.) *Santo Dio*, you've been squared? (Seeming surer and coming closer.) You've got your price? (Eagerly.) How much?

MRS. VIBERT, turning for an instant, in vague distress, this way and that; then facing him in desperation.

How much, Captain Lurcher, is yours?

LURCHER.

I've told you before. Seven thousand a year! (As Mrs. VIBERT turns away with the same blind oppression.) If you've really sold me, we've an account indeed!

MRS. VIBERT, seeing Miss DYER.

We'll settle our account in private.

LURCHER.

Excuse me: it's the publicity that *makes* the settlement!

Re-enter Miss DYER from the drawing-room.

MISS DYER.

Isn't our little party gathered?

MRS. VIBERT, at the door of the library.

I shall be here when I'm wanted.

Exit Mrs. VIBERT.

LURCHER, with a complete change of face and manner.

Well, Miss Dyer, I hope you've been able to give me a lift!

MISS DYER, very vague.

A lift, Captain Lurcher?

LURCHER.

As you promised an hour ago.

MISS DYER, now completely detached.

I'm afraid it's out of the question.

LURCHER.

You don't care then for my approval?

MISS DYER.

I'm not quite sure I ought!

LURCHER.

You might have found that out before!

MISS DYER.

Ah, *then* I didn't know!

LURCHER, blank.

Didn't know what?

MISS DYER, seeing MILDRED.

Ask Miss Stanmore!

Re-enter MILDRED through the ante-room from the left, brilliantly dressed for the evening.

LURCHER, to Miss DYER.

Why, her very dress is a promise! (Passes up with a salutation not acknowledged by MILDRED, who comes down to the fire.)

MISS DYER, meeting MILDRED at the fire.

I'm in such a flutter, darling!

MILDRED, surprised.

You?

MISS DYER, arch, accusing.

And you too, little trembler!

MILDRED, after an instant.

My trembling's over!

Re-enter through the ante-room from the right CLAUDE VIBERT, in evening dress.

LURCHER, to CLAUDE.

I've a word to say to you.

CLAUDE, preoccupied, coming down.

There's no time now.

LURCHER, following him.

There'll be time to-morrow, then! We'll *keep* Christmas!

Re-enter through the ante-room from the right Sir FREDERICK, in evening dress.

SIR FREDERICK.

Where's Mrs. Vibert?

MISS DYER.

I'll call her.

Exit Miss DYER to the library.

SIR FREDERICK, to LURCHER.

What a pity, Captain, that our game can't come off!

LURCHER.

Ah, Sir Frederick, our game *will* come off!

Sir FREDERICK turns and walks up, passing his hand over his eyes and head and visibly preoccupied; and LURCHER passes to the left, where he watches CLAUDE, who has crossed to MILDRED, before the fire.

CLAUDE, to MILDRED.

May I say three words to you?

MILDRED.

I don't recommend it!

CLAUDE.

I love. I hope. I wait.

MILDRED.

You'll not have to wait long!

She turns away as Miss DYER and Mrs. VIBERT reappear; and CLAUDE goes up to the left. LURCHER catches his hand as he passes him, and gives it a surreptitious shake of approbation. Re-enter from the library Miss DYER and Mrs. VIBERT.

SIR FREDERICK, looking round him.

Well then, are we all here?

Re-enter, as he speaks, NORMAN BYNG through the ante-room from the left, in travelling dress.

NORMAN, loud.

Yes, father, we're all here!

SIR FREDERICK, astounded.

You, Norman, back from India!

NORMAN.

This minute, father, to spend my Christmas.

SIR FREDERICK, recovering, with a violent effort from his shock; smiling and gallant.

Well then, you're exactly in time to hear what I was on the point of announcing. (Taking Mrs. VIBERT'S hand to present her.) My intended marriage to Mrs. Vibert!

LURCHER, to himself, with a gasp.

Ah, *that's* her price?

MILDRED, to NORMAN, as he rapidly comes to her.

That's why I called you!

ACT THIRD

The hall at Beechingham as in Act Second; early on the next afternoon. CLAUDE VIBERT on a sofa, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. Enter through the ante-room from the left Captain LURCHER, from church.

LURCHER.

So you're here, my boy? and in spite of your regimentals you didn't turn up at church?

CLAUDE.

I went to the door with my mother, but I didn't go in.

LURCHER.

And why did you betray so just an expectation?

CLAUDE.

I was worried, restless, nervous.

LURCHER.

I noticed as much this morning, being early on the scene.

CLAUDE, getting up.

You're always early on the scene!

LURCHER.

That habit's precisely what has brought me here now, before they come back from their devotions. At the end of half an hour I saw you wouldn't turn up, and I slipped out—I was near the door—on the chance of this particular treat. I went home, but you weren't at home: so I said to myself, "When he's not at home—"

CLAUDE, breaking in.

"He's mooning at the big house!" He *is*, Captain; he's waiting till church is out. But he's almost as ill at ease here as he would have been under a sermon.

LURCHER.

You haven't escaped a sermon from your chaplain in ordinary! I've come to do you good. (Looking round him.) We've got the big house to ourselves.

CLAUDE, thoughtful.

The big house and the little house will come to the same thing in the light of my mother's marriage.

LURCHER, disgusted.

Oh, your mother's marriage—!

CLAUDE, struck.

Don't you do her the honour to approve of it?

LURCHER, as if struck, on his side, with something in CLAUDE's tone; then very deliberate.

It's not your mother we want for the nuptial altar. My dear Claude, it's your mother's son.

CLAUDE, going up; detached, irresponsive.

Your interest in the family discriminates!

LURCHER, seated on the sofa and watching him.

Is it your stepbrother who makes you nervous?

CLAUDE.

My stepbrother?

LURCHER.

Isn't that what your mother's transformation makes of Mr. Byng?

CLAUDE, after an instant's thought; coming down again.

He's no relation to me!

LURCHER.

It's a bit complicated, but we must figure it out. His sudden return adds a nasty number to the sum!

CLAUDE.

His sudden return's his own affair. I've nothing to do with it!

LURCHER.

It's a delicate attention to his father, whose marriage, at this time of day, requires, no doubt, his supervision.

CLAUDE.

Is his father afraid of him?

LURCHER.

It's a compliment also to your mother, unless, peradventure, it's a criticism.

CLAUDE.

Is my mother afraid of him?

LURCHER.

I can't answer for her courage! But I see that I can for yours, which, as we used to say, is what was to be demonstrated. I should be ashamed of my creation if my creation broke down!

CLAUDE.

There can be but one consequence, for me, of Mr. Byng's return: to do before his face exactly as I would have done behind his back. That's rudimentary.

LURCHER, laughing.

And we long ago mastered the rudiments!

CLAUDE.

There's something due to one's mere dignity.

LURCHER.

For mere dignity you're a very prince! Continue to sustain the character.

CLAUDE.

If I haven't backed out for *her* attitude—

LURCHER, breaking in.

You won't back out for his, eh? I should like to see you!

CLAUDE.

The sight of them together, last night in our dance, was a torment that only made me take a vow.

LURCHER.

To get in ahead? I back you heavily. (Then after an instant, suggestive.) He was a danger only by his absence. On the spot he's a common fellow!

CLAUDE, after an instant.

Candidly, where's his distinction?

LURCHER, laughing.

Some day the young lady will ask you!

CLAUDE, thinking.

If I can make him think *me* a danger— !

LURCHER.

All you've got to do is to *be* one! (Going up and coming down.) Here's a chance; they're coming.

CLAUDE.

Please go out then.

LURCHER.

I'll smoke my cigar on the terrace.

Enter NORMAN BYNG and MILDRED through the ante-room from the left, from church, and come down together with CLAUDE on the right of the stage, before the fire, and LURCHER on the left.

NORMAN.

Good morning, Mr. Vibert. (To Lurcher.) Good morning.

CLAUDE, to Mildred.

I'm rather early, but Sir Frederick was so good as to ask me to luncheon.

MILDRED.

You're always punctual.

LURCHER, to Mildred.

I shall be punctual too, Miss Stanmore. Sir Frederick has done me the same honour.

Exit Lurcher through the ante-room to the left.

MILDRED.

Sir Frederick showers his honours!

NORMAN.

Of every kind! But if Captain Lurcher has brought Mr. Vibert over, he must of course be here to take Mr. Vibert back!

CLAUDE.

Do you think I'm so easily removed?

NORMAN.

I'm told you're handled with a facility—!

MILDRED, privately pleading.

Norman! (Turns away and goes up.)

NORMAN.

Where are you going?

MILDRED.

To take off my bonnet.

NORMAN.

When you've done so, please go to the library: I want to show you some wonderful things I've brought home.

MILDRED.

Delighted!

Exit MILDRED, through the ante-room to the left.

CLAUDE.

You mustn't mind what you've heard of me, Mr. Byng; you must judge for yourself.

NORMAN.

That will indeed be wise, as it's exactly what I came back from India for.

CLAUDE.

Your return, last night, added greatly to the brilliancy of our little fête.

NORMAN.

Your little fête had a lustre unexpectedly dazzling to *me!*

CLAUDE.

Yet your expectations must have been high, if you returned on purpose to see us.

NORMAN.

They were, I confess; but they've been surpassed. I've been admitted to a view, and I'm delighted to have come in time.

CLAUDE.

In time? Why, we're not going away!

NORMAN.

You've made your plans to remain, I know. But I seem to see that they're not yet wholly settled, and when plans are going on I'm so pushing—it's very meddlesome—as to like to have a finger in the pie!

CLAUDE.

Your taste can easily be gratified. Since your father's to be married, you're on the spot to give him away.

NORMAN.

Just as you're there to perform a similar office for your mother.

CLAUDE.

There's none that may conduce to her comfort or her credit that I'm not eager to render.

NORMAN, after an instant.

She'll require every service you're capable of.

CLAUDE, smiling.

Perhaps you exaggerate the dangers to which she's exposed!

NORMAN.

Don't say that, Mr. Vibert, till you know what they are.

CLAUDE.

When I listen to your threatening accents, Mr. Byng, I feel that I do know what they are!

Enter Miss DYER through the ante-room from the left, from church.

MISS DYER, coming down as CLAUDE speaks.

Threatening accents, on Christmas day? (Then after looking from one of the young men to the other.) Do you know what's going to happen?

NORMAN.

Mr. Vibert has evidently a notion!

MISS DYER.

As sure as the world, it's going to snow!

NORMAN, to CLAUDE.

Of course if you're snowed up you'll *have* to stay.

CLAUDE.

It will be very snug!

MISS DYER.

What a change, Mr. Byng, from the torrid zone, and how you must feel it!

NORMAN.

Oh yes, I feel it!

MISS DYER.

We're all so delighted to have you back.

NORMAN.

So Mr. Vibert was just telling me!

MISS DYER, with suspicion and anxiety in her manner.

Gentlemen shouldn't gossip in corners; they should keep their good things for the ladies. Do you mind if I take my things off here?

CLAUDE.

Dear Miss Dyer, we'll even help you!

MISS DYER, engaging.

Mr. Byng shall help me! (Presenting the back of her bonnet to NORMAN.) There's a long pin there: do you think you can get at it?

CLAUDE, at the door of the library, to NORMAN.

While you're divesting Miss Dyer, I'll join Miss Stanmore.

MISS DYER, alert, dissuasive.

I'm afraid she's writing a letter.

CLAUDE.

Perhaps I can suggest to her something to say!

Exit CLAUDE to the library.

MISS DYER, taking off her mantle with NORMAN's help.

When I said *we* all rejoice, Mr. Byng, of course I spoke mainly for myself!

NORMAN.

I believe in speaking for one's self; that's what *I* mean to do!

MISS DYER.

I could see that last evening, when you suddenly burst in. It was quite romantic.

NORMAN.

I didn't come back for romance, Miss Dyer; I came back for reality.

MISS DYER.

Ah yes, Sir Frederick's marriage. That *is* reality!

NORMAN.

We had better wait a little before we say so, especially (seeing Sir FREDERICK) as here he comes.

Enter Sir FREDERICK through the ante-room from the left, from church.

SIR FREDERICK, to Miss DYER.

I've left Mrs. Vibert in the greenhouse, selecting the flowers for to-night's dinner, which, under all the circumstances (looking at NORMAN) must be exquisite, eh? I wish you'd go and help her. (Miss DYER inclines herself and goes up, placing her bonnet and mantle on a chair on the right. Exit through the ante-room to the left.) I've a luxurious confidence in her taste.

NORMAN.

Are you speaking of Miss Dyer?

SIR FREDERICK.

I'm speaking of Mrs. Vibert.

NORMAN.

I'm glad of that, because Mrs. Vibert is exactly a subject on which, if you permit me, I should like to have three words with you.

SIR FREDERICK.

Permit me first a subject of my own. If I've waited till this morning to ask you the reason of your unceremonious reappearance—

NORMAN, taking up his words.

It's not that you don't want to know it? Well, sir, the two subjects are one and the same.

SIR FREDERICK.

Do you mean that Mrs. Vibert is the reason? (Then on a movement of admission from NORMAN.) What did you know about her?

NORMAN.

What I could read between the lines of your letters.

SIR FREDERICK.

I see you're as sharp as ever! Why didn't you pay me the compliment of telling me you were coming?

NORMAN.

Because I thought you might pay me that of ordering me not to.

SIR FREDERICK.

You deemed your presence, then, so urgent?

NORMAN.

Extremely urgent, father; and now that I'm on the ground I see everything to confirm that view.

SIR FREDERICK.

Very good! I would certainly rather be married with your participation than without it; and I shall now have the advantage of hearing you express it.

NORMAN.

I must decline to express anything of the sort. (The two men face each other a moment.) Where was *your* "participation" four months ago?

SIR FREDERICK, slightly embarrassed.

I'm keeping it for four years hence. You shall see it as soon as I can properly let you.

NORMAN.

Let it be a bargain then! You shall see mine on the same occasion.

SIR FREDERICK.

Do I understand that you prescribe me the terms on which you consent to my doing as I like?

NORMAN.

Haven't I a right to make conditions when I've been wronged by trusting you?

SIR FREDERICK, indignant.

What language, sir! What trust have I violated?

NORMAN.

My just confidence that as soon as you had got me out of the way you wouldn't eagerly promote the overtures that other persons have had the execrable taste to make to Miss Stanmore.

SIR FREDERICK.

You do me the grossest injustice. I've taken particular measures that no overtures whatever shall be made to Miss Stanmore.

NORMAN.

I can scarcely regard them effective when she is, at the present moment, in the library, a prey to the odious familiarity of your young foreign friend.

SIR FREDERICK.

Can I help it if Claude is over head and ears in love with her?

NORMAN.

You could help it well enough when *I* was! But of course I labour under the singular disqualification of happening to be your son! (Movement of Sir FREDERICK.) If you make so much of your good faith, will you give me a signal proof of it? Will you order that little humbug out of the house.

SIR FREDERICK, greatly moved.

Your manner of dealing with the question, sir, makes it unworthy of me to meet you. Mr. Vibert—Mr. Vibert— (Faltering.)

NORMAN.

Well, Mr. Vibert?

SIR FREDERICK.

Is the son of the person in the world whom I most cherish and respect.

NORMAN.

That's very well for you; but I'm not so heavily handicapped! Since you wash your hands so completely of my interests, I shall simply look after them myself. (Strides towards the library.)

SIR FREDERICK, alarmed.

Where are you going?

NORMAN.

To show him the way to the door!

SIR FREDERICK, passing quickly before him to the entrance of the library and defending it.

Don't touch him, at your cost! (As Mrs. Vibert appears in the ante-room; in a different tone.) I appeal to you in God's name!

Enter through the ante-room from the left Mrs. Vibert, from church and from the greenhouse, accompanied by Miss Dyer. With her hands full of the finest flowers and foliage, she pauses, as if struck by the mutual attitude of the two men, looking from one of them to the other. Then she deposits her flowers carefully on a table. Miss Dyer, who also has flowers, does the same.

MRS. VIBERT, to Miss Dyer.

Would you kindly keep my mantle for me?

Miss Dyer helps her to take the mantle off, and goes out with it through the ante-room to the left.

MRS. VIBERT, who has selected a white rose from the flowers on the table; to NORMAN, coming down.

Will you accept from me, on Christmas day, this modest peace-offering? (NORMAN takes the flower from her in silence, looks at her a moment; then turning to go up, flings it on a table. Mrs. VIBERT looks at Sir FREDERICK, who extends his clasped hands to her appealingly, deprecatingly, as if to confess that there is grave trouble; on which she says to him.) May I speak to him alone?

SIR FREDERICK.

Do what you can, and come and tell me!

Exit Sir FREDERICK through the ante-room to the right.

MRS. VIBERT, to NORMAN, who is at the drawing-room door.

Mr. Byng, will you listen to me a moment? (Then as NORMAN assents slightly, in silence, and comes down.) Your father and I are very old friends.

NORMAN.

That, madam, is your own affair.

MRS. VIBERT, as if without hearing his remark.

So that the understanding we have come to in the afternoon of life, which strikes you as abrupt and unexplained, is really only the fulfilment of an early dream.

NORMAN.

I've nothing to do with your early dreams; I've nothing to do with my father's; and I ask you for no explanations.

MRS. VIBERT.

I shall do my utmost to make him happy.

NORMAN.

And what will you do to make me so?

MRS. VIBERT, after an instant.

Whatever you demand of me.

NORMAN.

Then take your son out of the house!

MRS. VIBERT, with a moan of distress.

Ah, Mr. Byng! (Then seeing Captain LURCHER.) Don't speak of that now!

Re-enter Captain LURCHER through the ante-room from the left, looking hard as he comes down from Mrs. VIBERT to NORMAN.

LURCHER, to Mrs. VIBERT.

I saw you come in just now, and as I happen to desire particularly to speak to you, I've taken the liberty to follow you for the purpose.

MRS. VIBERT.

It's very good of you to be so eager!

LURCHER.

I only waited to finish my cigar.

MRS. VIBERT, to NORMAN.

We're interrupted, Mr. Byng; but I've more to say to you. Will you grant me the precious favour of another moment?

NORMAN.

To what purpose?

MRS. VIBERT, after an instant; abrupt.

Mr. Byng, I beseech you!

NORMAN.

I'll come back; with Captain Lurcher's gracious leave.

Exit NORMAN through the ante-room to the right.

LURCHER, calling after him with cheerful assurance.

Don't go too far, it's beginning to snow! (Then to MRS. VIBERT.) We shall be buried here for the day.

MRS. VIBERT.

Charming news, in *your* company! Isn't the nightmare of your perpetual presence enough at home, without the confusion and the shame of it here?

LURCHER.

Dear lady, it was precisely to make you taste that bitterness that I asked for this audience. I couldn't administer the draught last night; that's why my present minutes are precious. What do you wish to say to our rude young friend?

MRS. VIBERT.

What do you wish to say to me?

LURCHER.

That you'll please answer that question. (Then as she remains silent.) By which of the most irresistible of your arts are you winning him over?

MRS. VIBERT.

By the exercise of one you never practise—speaking the simple truth.

LURCHER.

I never speak it to the wrong person; but Mrs. Vibert should be the first to know that I usually speak it to the right one!

MRS. VIBERT.

You explain this aggression by your wish to gain time. Don't you perceive you're already too late?

LURCHER.

It's never too late to mend! You favoured me yesterday with an intimation which I confess I didn't wholly understand. But I grasp it better now, for Sir Frederick's brilliant announcement has lighted up the prospect. Your marriage is an exchange of commodities, a neat little commercial transaction. He gives you a home, an income, a future, a position; and you give him—

MRS. VIBERT, as he pauses.

You've not the least idea what!

LURCHER.

I beg your pardon—the assurance that you won't worry him any more. You hand him over the contract by which you're indissolubly tied to *me*, and you flatter yourself that he can burn it up. Dear lady, I've looked after that: it's more adapted to quench a flame than to feed one!

MRS. VIBERT.

With all your intelligence you've stupid moments. Don't you see the difference Mr. Byng's return has made?

LURCHER.

What did you know of Mr. Byng's return, when, last evening, before it took place, you basely sacrificed me? —said to yourself, "*I'm* all right; dear Lurcher may go to the devil!"

MRS. VIBERT.

You reproduce my soliloquies with a vividness!

LURCHER.

Mr. Byng's return *has* made a difference; but it's luckily all to my profit.

MRS. VIBERT.

You talk of your profit as a cannibal might talk of his diet! There's no provision for it in polite society.

LURCHER.

That fellow suspects you, he sees through you, he despises you.

MRS. VIBERT.

Didn't you just declare that I'm winning him over?

LURCHER.

I just declared that you're trying to—which is a very different thing. He'll prevent your marriage.

MRS. VIBERT.

Let me use your distinction—he'll "try" to!

LURCHER.

He'll turn you out of the house.

MRS. VIBERT.

My dear man, I've a lease.

LURCHER.

Not of this one. Therefore you'll turn him out first.

MRS. VIBERT.

Again?

LURCHER.

Practice makes perfect: this time you'll do it better. You've a grievance—you'll work it.

MRS. VIBERT.

My grievances are taking a rest—I should have to work yours!

LURCHER.

Mr. Byng's attitude—his hostility, his defiance, his irresistible itch to insult you, are a precious resource to us. (Looks at his watch.) You'll immediately make these things the basis of a declaration to Sir Frederick that your dignity is concerned in your not being exposed to outrage.

MRS. VIBERT.

So that Sir Frederick may request Mr. Byng to depart?

LURCHER.

To minimise the danger of your own departure.

MRS. VIBERT.

You're as clear as a bell!

LURCHER.

I know what I want.

MRS. VIBERT.

Yes, but do you know why you want it?

LURCHER.

When you've made your protest and Sir Frederick has made his concession, when you've protected your position and got rid, between you, of the enemy within the gates, you'll do the generous, you'll do the graceful, you'll reward Sir Frederick's sacrifice by a sacrifice of your own: you'll let him off his engagement.

MRS. VIBERT.

Don't put it as if he had met another woman!

LURCHER.

You'll decline to hold the poor dear to a profession of preposterous chivalry.

MRS. VIBERT.

Don't I perceive that the age of chivalry has come back?

LURCHER.

You'll return to the old footing.

MRS. VIBERT.

And you'll do the same!

LURCHER.

We'll remain at the little house—we'll cancel our surrender—we'll have our hands free again—we'll get Miss Stanmore! Claude shall be sublime.

MRS. VIBERT, after a silence.

He certainly shan't be ridiculous.

LURCHER.

You'll combat his passion, eh?

MRS. VIBERT.

What if, between Mr. Byng and me, Sir Frederick prefers to let me retire?

LURCHER.

You'll make that quite too hard for him.

MRS. VIBERT, after another silence.

And the penalty of my not adopting your admirable programme—?

LURCHER.

Is that the instant I encounter practical proof that you've departed from it, I will, on this very spot if necessary, make known to Claude the unspeakable truth you've succeeded in keeping from him; announce to him, in the heyday of his spirits and the morning of his pride, that he's a creature of shame, an indubitable, a proveable —bastard!

MRS. VIBERT, sinking upon a seat, and seated a moment with her eyes closed.

God have mercy on me!

Re-enter through the ante-room from the right, Miss DYER, who takes up her bonnet and mantle from the chair on which she has placed them. Mrs. VIBERT, who has quickly risen on becoming aware of her entrance, as if, as she comes down on the right, to avoid her, goes up on the left and reaches the window of the ante-room, where during the next short scene she stands absorbed and looking out at the thick-falling snow.

LURCHER, with instant urbanity.

Dear Miss Dyer, I've an attack of nerves. I should like to work it off at billiards.

MISS DYER.

On such a day as this? I'm not quite sure you ought!

LURCHER.

I've been so good: I've been to church!

MISS DYER.

For ten minutes—I saw you go out!

LURCHER.

It was my nerves, and I hoped you'd follow me. We might have had a quiet walk!

MISS DYER.

You're a very wicked man, and I wouldn't have come near you again if I hadn't to get my things.

LURCHER.

Must you leave me already?

MISS DYER.

I've my hands full of affairs.

LURCHER.

My affairs, I hope—*our* affairs!

MISS DYER, hesitating.

Isn't that castle in the air blown down?

LURCHER.

By Mr. Byng's return? I assure you it's not so shaky!

MISS DYER, thinking.

I wish I could have your confidence!

LURCHER.

You should, if I didn't believe you had already been undermined.

MISS DYER.

Undermined?

LURCHER.

Hasn't that fellow made up to you again?

MISS DYER.

To me? He has other occupation!

LURCHER.

Then he's the greater fool! (After an instant.) You *have* my confidence.

MISS DYER.

I meant your impudence.

LURCHER, as Mrs. VIBERT comes down again.

Have *hers!*

MRS. VIBERT, to Miss DYER.

Will you kindly tell me what you did with my mantle?

MISS DYER, surprised.

Are you going out? It's snowing hard!

MRS. VIBERT.

I don't care what it's doing—I'm going home.

MISS DYER.

You'll find your mantle in the morning-room.

Exit Miss DYER through the ante-room to the left.

LURCHER, who has gone up to look.

It *is* snowing—I shan't budge. You forget that you've an appointment with Mr. Byng.

MRS. VIBERT.

I shall not keep it.

LURCHER, as NORMAN reappears.

Not when he does? (Coming down.) Stir him up—put him through!

Re-enter NORMAN BYNG through the ante-room from the left. Exit LURCHER through the ante-room to the right. Mrs. VIBERT drops again on the sofa and sits gazing before her.

NORMAN, who has watched LURCHER's exit.

Where has he gone?

MRS. VIBERT.

I suppose to the billiard-room.

NORMAN.

I've come back at your request.

MRS. VIBERT, rising.

You've a sense of justice—you're willing to give me a chance.

NORMAN.

I may have a sense of justice, but I've also a sense of wrong. Therefore it's useless to flatter me.

MRS. VIBERT.

I'm ready to do something that will cost me more than that. (After an instant.) I'm ready to send away my son.

NORMAN.

For how long?

MRS. VIBERT.

Ah, you're not gracious! Can't you trust me?

NORMAN, after an instant.

I can't trust my father.

MRS. VIBERT.

I'll advise him loyally.

NORMAN.

Excuse me if I remember how you *have* advised him!

MRS. VIBERT.

What do you know about it?

NORMAN.

Was it not by your loyal advice that, four months ago, I was turned out of the house at five minutes' notice?

MRS. VIBERT.

What made you imagine that?

NORMAN.

Everything!

MRS. VIBERT.

I'll confess to you that I cast my weight into the scale; I deprived you of the few more days at home that you might have enjoyed. But I was moved by a very powerful and a very natural reason. The single moment I had had the honour of spending in your society sufficed to convince me that you disliked and mistrusted me.

NORMAN, simply.

How *could* I? I didn't know you.

MRS. VIBERT, smiling.

Perhaps that was exactly why! You had a poor opinion of me.

NORMAN.

I certainly had not the opinion that you had come into the house to injure me.

MRS. VIBERT.

I didn't! I didn't come for trouble, Mr. Byng—I came for peace!

NORMAN.

Do you call *this* peace?

MRS. VIBERT, after an instant; abrupt, passionate.

It *shall* be—if you'll help me!

NORMAN.

I don't understand you.

MRS. VIBERT.

Listen to me and you will. I'm not a bad woman—I'm only a very unhappy one.

NORMAN.

On the eve of your brilliant marriage?

MRS. VIBERT.

Ah, don't call it brilliant! (In another tone.) My son shall go to-morrow.

NORMAN.

Why not to-night?

MRS. VIBERT.

Can't you give me a few hours?

NORMAN.

How many did you give me?

MRS. VIBERT, struck; then after a moment.

He shall go this minute.

NORMAN.

Thank you. (Re-enter MILDRED from the library.) Can you inform Mrs. Vibert of the whereabouts of her son?

MILDRED, indicating the library.

I left him there.

NORMAN.

I'll join you.

MILDRED, who has crossed to the drawing-room door.

Join me here.

Exit MILDRED.

NORMAN, at the drawing-room door; standing an instant with his eyes on Mrs. VIBERT.

You know where to find him.

Exit NORMAN.

MRS. VIBERT, alone; after a silence.

Poor little Claude!

Re-enter Miss DYER through the ante-room from the left.

MISS DYER.

I'm collecting the company for luncheon.

MRS. VIBERT.

You needn't collect my son—he's going too.

MISS DYER, surprised.

Mayn't I at least secure the Captain?

MRS. VIBERT, at the door of the library.

I wish to God you would! Farewell.

Exit Mrs. VIBERT.

MISS DYER, alone; blank.

"Farewell"? She takes leave? (After an instant.) I'm not quite sure she ought! (Re-enter LURCHER through the anteroom from the right.) You at least will stay?

LURCHER.

Rather! Who fails us?

MISS DYER.

Mrs. Vibert and her son.

LURCHER, struck.

Her son? Why in the world?

MISS DYER.

I haven't the least idea. (Engaging.) Should you like me to sit next you at luncheon?

LURCHER, disconcerted, preoccupied.

I don't care where you sit at luncheon!

MISS DYER, mystified and reproachful.

Do you only like me here?

LURCHER, impatient.

I don't like you anywhere!

MISS DYER.

Monster!

Exit Miss DYER to the drawing-room.

LURCHER, alone.

What has happened, then? Where are they? What base conspiracy—? (Hesitating, looking about; then considering while his eyes rest a moment on the door of the library.) Is it hatching *there?* (Goes to the door and, with his hand on the knob, stands an instant listening.)

Re-enter NORMAN BYNG from the drawing-room.

NORMAN, observing LURCHER before he is aware.

Perhaps I can save you that trouble, if it's a question of curiosity!

LURCHER, startled, annoyed.

Excuse me! (Then recovering himself.) I was just proceeding to my young friend.

NORMAN.

Proceeding through the keyhole? The place to find your young friend, from this moment, will not be in this house.

LURCHER, with returning assurance.

Do you mean that he has left it?

NORMAN, after a moment's hesitation.

He has left it.

LURCHER.

At your request?

NORMAN.

That will do for a reason.

LURCHER, protesting.

Oh, scarcely!

NORMAN, looking at him a moment and then coming nearer.

Don't you believe, in such a case, in the efficacy of my requests?

LURCHER, with sudden briskness, after meeting Norman's eyes and standing his ground.

I'll go and bring him back!

Exit LURCHER through the ante-room to the left.

NORMAN, alone, laughing and calling after him.

Don't bring him through the keyhole! (Re-enter Mrs. VIBERT from the drawing-room, closing the door behind her quickly as she sees NORMAN.) Has he gone?

MRS. VIBERT.

Ah, Mr. Byng, you're not reasonable!

NORMAN.

Do you mean that *he's* not?

MRS. VIBERT.

Of course he's not—with the state of his affections. Will you do me a favour? Avoid him before he goes.

NORMAN.

Avoid him?

MRS. VIBERT.

Don't let him see you.

NORMAN, smiling.

Do you mean I'm in danger?

MRS. VIBERT.

It's absurd, but he's jealous.

NORMAN.

Absurd? It's terrific!—I'll be on my guard. But should like a pledge from you first.

MRS. VIBERT.

Another? I've given you one already.

NORMAN.

You told me he should go, but you didn't tell me he shouldn't come back.

MRS. VIBERT, after an instant.

Haven't *you* come back?

NORMAN.

I come to my father's house.

MRS. VIBERT, after another instant.

He'll come to his mother's.

NORMAN.

To take the place you'll have kept warm for him till I shall have been once more got out of the way?

MRS. VIBERT, wounded, indignant.

Ah, you go too far—you insult me!

Re-enter, as she speaks, CLAUDE VIBERT from the library. He starts with the shock of her last words; then quickly goes to her.

CLAUDE.

"Insults" you, mother, before *me?*

MRS. VIBERT, alarmed, confused, recovering herself.

No, my dear boy, not before you! Mr. Byng, will you be so good as to leave us?

CLAUDE, authoritative.

A moment, sir! Before you go, you'll apologise to my mother for your outrage.

MRS. VIBERT, seizing his arm.

Claude, don't interfere! You know nothing of what has occurred.

CLAUDE.

It's enough for me to be sure, from looking at Mr. Byng and from my observation of his attitude from the moment he arrived, that he has made himself deliberately offensive.

MRS. VIBERT, to NORMAN.

I beseech you to leave us.

NORMAN, after he has quietly looked at CLAUDE up and down.

Excuse me, madam, if—in my father's house—I decline to take flight before the preposterous attitude of your son.

CLAUDE.

Mr. Byng may stay or go: I shall not lose sight of him till I've given him a lesson in respect.

NORMAN.

You ought to be qualified—as you've just had one yourself from Miss Stanmore!

CLAUDE, with a movement toward NORMAN.

Brute!

MRS. VIBERT, interposing, struggling with her son.

Come away, Claude, I command you!

CLAUDE.

Yield an inch before *him?* Not till I know the reason why!

MRS. VIBERT.

Let it be enough for you that *I* know it!

NORMAN.

Yours won't content him, I think. Please leave me to give him a better.

MRS. VIBERT.

God forbid I should leave you! (Passionately.) I came here for peace—only for peace!

NORMAN.

You had better go away for peace!

CLAUDE, supremely exasperated.

A threat? to my mother! (Passing rapidly across Mrs. VIBERT, with a blow at NORMAN.) *That's* the way to treat you!

NORMAN, flashing up his arm to return the blow.

Ah!

MRS. VIBERT, throwing herself between them and staying his arm.

Don't strike him—he's your brother!

NORMAN, bewildered, dropping his arm.

My brother!

CLAUDE, falling back.

His brother?

MRS. VIBERT, to CLAUDE.

Forgive me, and pity me! (Looking from one to the other.) Forgive each other! (Then to NORMAN.) Farewell!

Exit Mrs. VIBERT rapidly through the ante-room to the left.

NORMAN and CLAUDE, left confronted, stare at each other as if trying to understand, to complete her meaning; after a moment they appear to do so, and the extraordinary truth grows clear to them. As this happens CLAUDE turns slowly away from NORMAN, looks about him as if dazed, at bay; then sinks down on the sofa, utterly overcome, covering his face with his hands. NORMAN stands a moment longer, looking down at CLAUDE and seeming to hesitate; after which, as if with a strong determination and at the same time an irresistible impulse, he goes quickly up and out through the ante-room to the left. As soon as he has gone, re-enter MILDRED from the library. She hesitates an instant, seeing CLAUDE; then, as if struck and surprised by his attitude, comes forward. She perceives still more that something has happened to him, and, looking at him wonderingly in her passage, while he continues absorbed in the shock he has received and unconscious of her, she goes noiselessly up the stage and reaches the ante-room. Here she pauses, considering a moment; then she comes down a few steps toward CLAUDE.

MILDRED.

Mr. Vibert, if I wounded you a while ago, I'm sorry. (CLAUDE starts at the sound of her voice and rises—looks at her as if collecting his thoughts.) You wearied out my patience, but we'll never speak of such things again.

CLAUDE, slowly and with infinite sadness; standing a minute with his eyes on the ground and raising them to MILDRED's face.

Never again—never again!

MILDRED.

Thank you! (She lingers an instant, mystified; then goes up again. Abruptly, however, she comes down once more and looks at CLAUDE as if with a vague sense that his case is bad.) Shake hands on that; we can at least be friends. (She puts out her hand to him; with a sudden impulse, passionately and as if in utter farewell, he bends over it, kisses it, drops it and turns away. MILDRED goes up and pauses momentarily, looking back at him till LURCHER reappears, when she goes out through the ante-room to the right.)

CLAUDE, to himself; lost.

Does every one know it? does *she* know it? (Re-enter LURCHER through the ante-room from the left.) Does *he?* (Then vehemently.) Where's my mother? what has become of her?

LURCHER.

Never mind your mother; you must learn to manage for yourself! I found it a gross fabrication that you had gone.

CLAUDE, to himself; haunted, wondering, turning away.

Does he know? *does* he?

LURCHER, nodding to the right.

Why *should* you go, indeed, from that sweet, kind face? Don't tell me the maiden's cruel!

CLAUDE, abrupt, startling.

I've a request to make of you, Captain. Never speak to me of Miss Stanmore again!

LURCHER, dismayed.

Why, it's what I'm here for!

CLAUDE.

Then it's not what *I* am!

LURCHER, aghast.

You've renounced the prize?

CLAUDE.

For ever and ever!

LURCHER.

You've given way?

CLAUDE.

I've given way.

LURCHER.

To that mediocrity?

CLAUDE.

Don't speak to me of Mr. Byng!

LURCHER, still more mystified.

Will you be so good as to mention a person or two I

may speak to you of? (Then definitely apprehensive.) Has some one scared you?

CLAUDE.

Almost to death! In God's name, Captain, what does it mean? What do you know? To what misery have I waked up?

LURCHER, staring, staggered.

Your mother has had the gross indelicacy—?

CLAUDE, precipitately.

You know it—you've always known it—and you never told me?

LURCHER, after an instant.

"Told" you? Of what use would you have been then?

CLAUDE.

I wouldn't have had the folly, I wouldn't have had the front—! (Checks himself as MILDRED reappears.)

Re-enter MILDRED through the ante-room from the right.

MILDRED.

Mr. Vibert, Sir Frederick has asked me to say that he would like to speak to you.

CLAUDE, to himself, with a start.

My father? (To Mildred.) Thank you!

Exit CLAUDE through the ante-room to the right.

LURCHER.

Can you tell me what has become of Mrs. Vibert?

MILDRED.

Mrs. Vibert? (Seeing NORMAN: re-enter NORMAN through the ante-room from the left.) Where *is* Mrs. Vibert?

NORMAN.

She's here (to Lurcher—) to say a word to *you!*

Re-enter Mrs. VIBERT through the ante-room from the left, in her mantle, while NORMAN opens the door of the library and signs to MILDRED to pass out. Exeunt MILDRED and NORMAN to the library. Mrs. VIBERT comes down and stands an instant face to face with LURCHER.

LURCHER.

I should have thought the most convenient thing would have been for you to take to your heels!

MRS. VIBERT.

Mr. Byng followed me to the door—he stopped me. But I've only come back to take leave.

LURCHER.

Of *me*, madam? Very pretty of you!

MRS. VIBERT.

Of you, Captain Lurcher, for ever and ever.

LURCHER.

That's as I shall determine.

MRS. VIBERT.

Claude shall determine now.

LURCHER.

Your sentence—among other things?

MRS. VIBERT.

I've accepted my sentence.

LURCHER.

From Mr. Byng?

MRS. VIBERT, after an instant.

Mr. Byng's a gentleman.

LURCHER, as CLAUDE reappears.

And Mr. Vibert, alas, isn't!

Re-enter CLAUDE through the ante-room from the right.

CLAUDE, holding out his arms.

Mother!

LURCHER, with ineffable disgust, while Mrs. VIBERT swiftly throws herself into them.

Oh, gratitude! It's a noble service she has rendered you!

MRS. VIBERT, to CLAUDE.

I escaped from my long bondage—I answered his eternal threat.

CLAUDE, vague.

His eternal threat?

MRS. VIBERT.

To open your eyes, as they are open now. The secret of my strange patience—the misery of my hidden life!

CLAUDE, with unspeakable compassion.

Mother—mother!

MRS. VIBERT.

Judge of the rest when I tell you that *this* is almost bliss.

LURCHER.

You can judge of the bliss by the quality she has conferred on *you!*

CLAUDE, silent a moment, as if bewildered with revelations; but pulling himself together.

I think I shall be happier, Captain Lurcher, when you and I are severed.

LURCHER.

You too turn against me — the very creature I've fashioned?

CLAUDE.

Your work's complete; I can go alone!

Re-enter Sir FREDERICK through the ante-room from the right.

SIR FREDERICK, who stands a moment looking from Mrs. VIBERT to CLAUDE.

Captain Lurcher, I've a service to ask of you. Will you kindly pass into the drawing-room?

LURCHER, after an instant.

Sir Frederick, I've ceased to believe in drawing-rooms! Permit me a remoter refuge. (Then from the ante-room, with a sarcastic flourish of his hat.) I wish you all a merry Christmas and a very intimate New Year!

Exit LURCHER to the left.

SIR FREDERICK, who has accepted his withdrawal with a gesture of mystified resignation.

Eleanor, you told me on our way from church that you would fix the day for our marriage. I'm deeply impatient it should be settled.

MRS. VIBERT.

I'm in Claude's hands—let Claude settle it.

CLAUDE, to Sir FREDERICK.

I'm much obliged to you; but my mother is mine now —only mine!

SIR FREDERICK.

Ours, my dear boy; more than ever ours!

CLAUDE.

Too late, too late — after too many years! Come, mother.

SIR FREDERICK, greatly moved.

You're going?—you're leaving me alone?

MRS. VIBERT.

No, not alone.

CLAUDE.

I've been ignorant all my life: that kept me a child. Now that I know, I've become a man. I'll take care of my mother.

SIR FREDERICK, plaintively, desperately.

And who'll take care of me?

MRS. VIBERT.

I'll tell you! (To Claude.) Mr. Byng and Miss Stanmore are in the library—please call them. (Claude opens the door of the library; on which re-enter Norman and Mildred.) Grant me a last favour—consent to their marriage.

SIR FREDERICK.

It shall be early in the new year.

MRS. VIBERT.

They'll take care of you.

CLAUDE, to Norman.

I raised my hand against you—forgive me. (Norman takes his hand and holds it while they stand looking at each other.)

SIR FREDERICK, with a supreme appeal.

Eleanor!

MRS. VIBERT.

She'll take care of you. (Then to Mildred, pleadingly, touchingly.) You *will* be devoted?

MILDRED, looking an instant, with intensity, from Mrs. Vibert to Norman and from Norman to Sir Frederick.

We'll all be devoted!

MRS. VIBERT, with mingled deprecation and relief.

All?

MILDRED, resolutely, gratefully, while she throws herself into Mrs. Vibert's arms.

All!

DISENGAGED

IN THREE ACTS

CHARACTERS

Sir Montagu Brisket, Bart., M.P.
Captain Prime.
Percy Trafford.
Charles Coverley.
Mrs. Jasper.
Lady Brisket.
Mrs. Wigmore.
Blandina.
A Parlour-maid.

The first two Acts within the domain of Brisket Place; the third in London.

ACT FIRST

An old-fashioned lawn or small pleasance, in a slightly neglected or deserted condition, on a height or a slope, commanding, in the distance, across a valley, a little winding, shining river, with a rustic bridge which leads over to an extensive park, a part of the same property. A bright, warm day, early in the autumn, with bright October tints, the gleam of the river in the valley, the spire of a country church on the opposite uplands; the whole making a particularly beautiful, peaceful English view. At the back, obliquely, to the right, the old grey front of a small but highly picturesque manor-house, once of some distinction, but now more humbly tenanted, with a porch or approach of three broad semicircular stone steps. Further to the right, a good way down, a piece of garden wall, with a small wooden gate. At the back, all across the stage, from the house to the left, the low, red, mossy wall or parapet of the garden, interrupted in the centre by a charming old gate, surmounted by an arch of fanciful rusty ironwork, outlined against the sky and partly muffled in red Virginia creeper. On the hither side of the wall, on the left, a good way down and facing the wooden gate, an old stone garden bench with a highish back, mossy and picturesque, at the base of a weather-stained statue or image which is set in a high clump of shrubbery and which, with its screen of verdure, forms one side, the side nearest the audience, of a passage or exit, the short cut to the neighbouring ruins of an old abbey.

Sir MONTAGU BRISKET seated on the stone bench with a newspaper in his hand, to which he gives a vague, bored, yawning attention, and several other newspapers beside him. There are three or four garden chairs about. Mrs. WIGMORE comes out of the house, carrying or propelling before her with difficulty a light wicker bench or settee,

with a back, capable of holding two persons, and proceeds with a business-like air to get it into place, well up at the right, near the garden-wall, between the house and the centre.

SIR MONTAGU, looking up.

Bless my soul, Flora, is there no one to help you?

MRS. WIGMORE, going back for a cushion and a bright-coloured travelling rug which have been deposited on the steps of the house.

No one but your keeper's wife—she's busy preparing tea.

SIR MONTAGU, going on with his paper.

Do you mean to say we're going to have tea?

MRS. WIGMORE.

After our lunch on that precipitous slope? (Arranging the cushion, with little pats, on the settee, and the rug, tentatively, in combination with it.) I mean to say that *I* am!

SIR MONTAGU, looking up again, mystified afresh by what she is doing.

And what has that to do with it?

MRS. WIGMORE, trying the settee and then getting up.

It's a place to sit.

SIR MONTAGU.

There are plenty of places to sit!

MRS. WIGMORE, disposing the rug in another manner.

You've got the best!

SIR MONTAGU.

It's a bad best, my dear.

MRS. WIGMORE.

That's your own fault—letting this dear old place tumble to pieces.

SIR MONTAGU, goodhumouredly, once more going on with his paper.

Well, the pieces serve our purpose!

MRS. WIGMORE.

Your wife's purpose, yes!

SIR MONTAGU.

That of coming over, with a few friends, to spend a happy day.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Do you find such days so happy?

SIR MONTAGU, looking at his watch.

They're apt to drag a little, perhaps, about this hour.

MRS. WIGMORE.

When you're left alone with *me?* Thank you!

SIR MONTAGU.

My dear sister, I haven't your resources. (Watching her an instant again, while she continues her odd proceedings with the settee.) I'm amazed at the extent of them now.

MRS. WIGMORE.

I want to make my poor child comfortable.

SIR MONTAGU.

Is all that for Blandina?

MRS. WIGMORE.

Isn't everything I do for Blandina?

SIR MONTAGU.

You do too much, you work her too hard.

MRS. WIGMORE.

My dear brother, if you were a parent you'd perhaps have parental instincts, and if you had any instincts at all you'd perhaps open your eyes. I'm not ashamed to keep mine fixed on certain manifestations, and it's a pity you on your side are so blind to certain others.

SIR MONTAGU, trying to follow.

Do you allude to the manifestations of my political opponents?

MRS. WIGMORE.

Bother your political opponents!

SIR MONTAGU.

That's exactly what I try to do! I see in this morning's *Times*—

MRS. WIGMORE, breaking in.

What I want you to see is something you won't see in the *Times!* You have opponents who are not political—though they're profound enough, no doubt.

SIR MONTAGU.

Are they as profound as you? You're unfathomable!

MRS. WIGMORE, as a light laugh is heard to the left, a short distance off.

Here they come! Take me somewhere—to the ruins.

SIR MONTAGU.

The formidable persons you describe? Let me face them at least!

MRS. WIGMORE.

I mean Blandina and her worshipper.

SIR MONTAGU.

Have you succeeded in making her the object of a cult?

MRS. WIGMORE.

Captain Prime's devotion has assumed a character not for a moment to be mistaken.

SIR MONTAGU.

Since when? I haven't seen him at Brisket.

MRS. WIGMORE.

You'll see him there to-morrow!

SIR MONTAGU.

Having provided him with an idol, you expect him to go to the expense of a shrine?

MRS. WIGMORE.

He leads a blameless life, though he *is* in the Guards;

and he has a decent income, though he *is* a younger son.

SIR MONTAGU.

Oh, I know; property from his mother.

MRS. WIGMORE.

With country neighbours—it's such a blessing—one does know. (Disappointed, seeing Lady BRISKET accompanied by PERCY TRAFFORD.) But it's not my pair, it's your pair!

SIR MONTAGU.

Well, then, come to the ruins.

MRS. WIGMORE.

You needn't take me—the ruins are here.

SIR MONTAGU, blank.

Here?

MRS. WIGMORE.

The ruins of your domestic security!

Enter from the left, from the ruins, Lady BRISKET and PERCY TRAFFORD, he carrying a photographic camera and certain accessories, with which he is considerably encumbered and embarrassed, while she, very pretty and elegant, in light gloves, with her lace-fringed parasol up, nurses in its case a prepared plate, ready to be inserted into the instrument.

LADY BRISKET.

This is the place; this charming view and the dear old keeper's house. And we can take in Montagu.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Oh yes, you can take in Montagu!

LADY BRISKET.

Dear Flora, can't we take *you* in?

MRS. WIGMORE.

Never in the world!

LADY BRISKET, to her husband.

I'm having immense fun with Mr. Trafford—I'm giving him lessons!

SIR MONTAGU, watching TRAFFORD, who is rather awkwardly setting up the camera on its tall supports.

Is photography a branch now required in the diplomatic service?

TRAFFORD, gay.

Dear Sir Montagu, there's a standing rule in the diplomatic service: learn everything you can from the ladies!

LADY BRISKET.

I must have an assistant, and I'm bound to say Mr. Trafford's a very good one.

TRAFFORD, coming down.

It seems, on Lady Brisket's part, a veritable mania.

SIR MONTAGU.

The infatuation of an hour! She'll have a new one to-morrow.

TRAFFORD.

A new infatuation perhaps, but (smiling devotedly at Lady BRISKET) not, I hope, a new assistant!

LADY BRISKET, after acknowledging this remark with a gracious bow.

Montagu, you must sit for us—say on that pretty bench (indicating the settee) that seems to have been arranged on purpose; you and Flora (smiling candidly at Mrs. WIGMORE), side by side.

MRS. WIGMORE, to herself, struck; seeing at the right Captain PRIME and BLANDINA.

"Side by side"? That'll do for *them!* (Enter from the right by the wooden gate Captain PRIME and BLANDINA, while Mrs. WIGMORE continues eagerly to Lady BRISKET.) I don't think I'm in your style of art. But you shall do my charming child.

TRAFFORD, very responsive.

We shall be delighted. Miss Wigmore is particularly charming.

MRS. WIGMORE, sharp.

Then why are you dangling after married women?

TRAFFORD, startled, but recovering himself and highly complimentary.

Dear madam, are *you* unconscious of their attraction?

LADY BRISKET, with her prepared plate, to TRAFFORD.

Here's the plate; make everything ready.

SIR MONTAGU, to his wife, while TRAFFORD, who has taken the plate, goes and gets under the voluminous cloth which covers the camera.

And then the results are called yours?

LADY BRISKET.

We'll call these ours!

SIR MONTAGU, looking at her a moment, then turning his back; dry.

Thank you; I'm out of it! (He meets Captain PRIME, with whom he stands talking.)

MRS. WIGMORE, down on the left.

Blandina, come here!

BLANDINA, instantly coming.

Yes, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Try not to look dreadful.

BLANDINA.

Yes, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Stick in that hairpin; you're going to be taken.

BLANDINA, with her hands at her hair.

Yes, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Keep down your hands.

BLANDINA.

Yes, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE.

You'll be taken with Captain Prime.

BLANDINA.

Oh, mamma, must I *ask* him?

MRS. WIGMORE, after consideration.

No, you mustn't ask him.

BLANDINA.

Then what must I do?

MRS. WIGMORE.

You must make him. Where were you going with him?

BLANDINA, dropping her eyes.

To the ruins.

MRS. WIGMORE.

You'll go to the ruins afterwards.

BLANDINA.

Yes, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Visit them thoroughly. Do you remember their history?

BLANDINA.

No, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE.

One of the most celebrated sanctuaries of the Middle Ages; begun in the eleventh century, terminated in the fourteenth.

BLANDINA.

Yes, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Favourite burial-place of the Norman queens.

BLANDINA.

Yes, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Injured by fire under Henry the Seventh; despoiled of its treasures under Henry the Eighth.

BLANDINA.

Yes, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE.

But take your little attitude first.

BLANDINA.

Yes, mamma.

BLANDINA goes straight up to the settee, while Sir MONTAGU approaches Mrs. WIGMORE and Captain PRIME wanders to the stone bench and dejectedly takes up a newspaper left there by Sir MONTAGU.

SIR MONTAGU, to Mrs. WIGMORE.

Will you come to the ruins now?

MRS. WIGMORE.

Oh no, not now: we'll go to the dairy.

SIR MONTAGU.

What did you mean about Amy?

MRS. WIGMORE, down on the right.

And her "assistant"? (Very sarcastic.) It's a new name!

SIR MONTAGU, after an instant.

A new name for what?

MRS. WIGMORE, passing out of the wooden gate.

I'll tell you at the dairy.

SIR MONTAGU, with an uncomfortable laugh, following her.

I believe you'll sour the milk!

Exeunt Sir MONTAGU and Mrs. WIGMORE.

TRAFFORD, with the camera, to BLANDINA, who has disposed herself as attractively as possible on the settee.

I think we can do something with you, Miss Wigmore, if you'll assume a cheerful expression of face.

BLANDINA, smiling seductively.

Captain Prime!

PRIME, his face to the stone bench, with his newspaper, without turning round.

Miss Wigmore?

BLANDINA.

Have *you* ever been taken?

PRIME.

Taken? I've been pursued, but I've never been captured.

TRAFFORD, busy with the apparatus.

Oh, we'll capture you now—I warn you we never miss! Miss Wigmore, keep extraordinarily still.

BLANDINA, agitating herself.

Then Captain Prime must keep still too—he fidgets me so!

TRAFFORD, reproachful.

My dear Captain, *don't* fidget Miss Wigmore.

PRIME, in the same position.

I'm not dreaming of Miss Wigmore; I'm half a mile away.

LADY BRISKET, to BLANDINA.

I'll keep him quiet, my dear. (To Captain PRIME, passing to the left.) You've been quite lost to us; you disappeared directly after luncheon.

PRIME.

Miss Wigmore took me away.

LADY BRISKET, encouraging.

And where did Miss Wigmore take you?

PRIME, casual, vague.

Oh, I don't know—all over the place.

LADY BRISKET.

And did you come across Mrs. Jasper?

PRIME.

No, I wish we had. (Expressively, invidiously.) Mrs. Jasper's attractive!

LADY BRISKET, after an instant.

So all you gentlemen seem to think.

PRIME.

She's so enviable, in her freedom.

LADY BRISKET.

Her freedom is the freedom of a woman who has lost her husband early.

PRIME, laughing.

Better late than never!

LADY BRISKET.

There are always the husbands of others. Mine is particularly devoted to her, and has a convenient theory that she's my best and oldest friend. It's in that capacity that she's now staying at Brisket.

PRIME.

Sir Montagu has a rival. We met Charles Coverley.

LADY BRISKET.

Of course Charles Coverley was looking for her.

PRIME.

He asked eagerly if we'd seen her.

LADY BRISKET.

He never does anything else.

PRIME, seeing Mrs. JASPER at the centre.

We're to have that privilege now.

LADY BRISKET.

She's looking for Montagu. (Enter Mrs. JASPER by the great gate from the right. To Mrs. JASPER.) I must see about tea. Please to control Captain Prime!

Exit Lady BRISKET to the house.

MRS. JASPER, to PRIME, smiling and coming down with her finger in a sketch-book that she carries.

You belong to a species that is usually beyond my control!

PRIME.

How do you know, Mrs. Jasper, to what species I belong?

MRS. JASPER.

Why, you've the general form, the costume, and some of the distinguishing signs. But now that I look at you more attentively, these features are perhaps only the redeeming ones.

PRIME.

It's very kind of you to look at me more attentively!

MRS. JASPER.

You see that if I'm to do what Lady Brisket asks, I must exert the power of my eye.

PRIME.

You're happy to have so many powers to exert!

MRS. JASPER.

Don't begin on that principle, or I shall think you do belong to the species! (After an instant, explaining.) I mean the species of Mr. Coverley. (Looking round her.) And of Mr. Trafford. (Then after another moment.) And even of poor dear Sir Montagu.

PRIME, smiling.

I know what you mean now! Sir Montagu isn't here.

MRS JASPER, with laughing confidence

Oh, he'll be back in a moment !

PRIME.

Coverley's on his way, at any rate. He has been making the copses ring with your name.

MRS. JASPER.

I heard him, but I lay low. I found such a quiet little nook to sketch.

PRIME.

Are you very fond of sketching ?

MRS. JASPER.

I find it a kind of refuge.

PRIME, wistful.

I wish *I* had a kind of a refuge !

MRS. JASPER, slightly struck.

From what, Captain Prime ?

PRIME, after an instant.

I'll tell you another day.

MRS. JASPER.

I shall particularly remind you !

TRAFFORD, who during this and the foregoing dialogue has been trying with BLANDINA different attitudes, different distances and focuses.

Captain Prime, come and keep Miss Wigmore quiet. Her head goes up and down like a dinner-bell.

PRIME, plaintive.

To call *me* to dinner! (With a gesture of desperation he goes up while Trafford comes down; but, to keep away from BLANDINA, he gets under the cloth of the camera and remains during the next dialogue focussing other objects.)

TRAFFORD, to Mrs. JASPER at the left.

I wish awfully we might take *you!*

MRS. JASPER.

I like your editorial "we"! You're at the most a contributor.

TRAFFORD.

Then won't you be a subscriber?

MRS. JASPER.

I don't encourage improper publications!

TRAFFORD.

You're always accusing me of something dreadful. The last time I think it was of flirting.

MRS. JASPER.

The last time? The first time! I never saw such a case.

TRAFFORD.

If you mean that I'm susceptible, I confess it's an infirmity of my nature. But I struggle with it—I assure you I do!

MRS. JASPER.

Are you getting Miss Wigmore to help you to struggle? You might leave *her* alone!

TRAFFORD.

I do, you see, as soon as another woman appears. I really wish you'd sit!

MRS. JASPER.

To figure in the gallery of your conquests?

TRAFFORD.

You'd be the gem of the collection—the flower of the family!

MRS. JASPER.

Your collection's too large, and your family already, I should think, about as much as you can comfortably maintain.

TRAFFORD.

I'd desert it without remorse for you!

MRS. JASPER, plaintive.

Every one wants to do everything for "me." I wish they'd do a little for somebody else!

TRAFFORD.

There's nobody else so inspiring. You inspire us all.

MRS. JASPER, after an instant, considering, with a faintly melancholy headshake.

No. Not "all."

TRAFFORD.

I'm glad to hear it—it makes more chances for the rest.

MRS. JASPER.

It will never make a chance for Mr. Percy Trafford.

TRAFFORD.

Ah, if you turn him off, he won't care what he does!

MRS. JASPER.

He's a very dreadful sort of person.

TRAFFORD.

I make you responsible! Appreciation's a need of my being—I shall continue to look for it!

MRS. JASPER, looking after him as he goes up, while Sir MONTAGU reappears at the right.

You'll find it, more's the pity—I blush for my sex! (Re-enter Sir MONTAGU BRISKET by the wooden gate; on which Mrs. JASPER goes on, as she sees him come straight to her.) Oh, dear—I blush for his!

SIR MONTAGU.

There's something I wan't particularly to say to you.

MRS. JASPER.

Again? (Then having seated herself on the stone bench, where she retouches with a pencil a page of her sketch-book.) I listen, Sir Montagu.

SIR MONTAGU, seating himself beside her.

I wish you hadn't so many accomplishments: they're fatal to you're friends!

MRS. JASPER, with a sigh.

I'd exchange them all for one I don't possess!

SIR MONTAGU.

Ah, which one don't you possess?

MRS. JASPER.

The art of passing unperceived.

SIR MONTAGU.

Dear lady, you'll never cease, I think, to "draw."

MRS. JASPER, continuing to work.

As I'm not remarkably old, that's a terrible prospect.

SIR MONTAGU.

You're not remarkably old, but you're remarkably wise.

MRS. JASPER, with another sigh.

Oh, I've been through such a lot!

SIR MONTAGU.

That opens one's eyes indeed. Mine are open now.

MRS. JASPER.

Yours? (Working her pencil.) What have you been through?

SIR MONTAGU.

A *tête-a-tête* with my sister. That's precisely why I want—

MRS. JASPER, interrupting, rising.

Another with me? (Laughing.) Not milk and water after champagne!

SIR MONTAGU, still seated; having caught her hand, detaining her.

The milk of human kindness and the water of oblivion! You must help me!

MRS. JASPER, becoming aware of Lady BRISKET, who has reappeared on the steps of the house.

Be quiet—your wife! (Re-enter Lady BRISKET from the house, stopping short as she sees Sir MONTAGU and Mrs. JASPER and notes her husband's marked attitude of appeal; to counteract which Mrs. JASPER gaily calls across to her.) Amy dear, I'm coming in for tea!

LADY BRISKET, ironical.

Pray don't hurry, darling!

Exit Lady BRISKET to the house.

SIR MONTAGU, drawing Mrs. JASPER down again.

That's just what I want—that you should speak to her.

MRS. JASPER.

What do you wish me to say?

SIR MONTAGU.

That I justly resent her behaviour.

MRS. JASPER, vague.

Her behaviour?

SIR MONTAGU.

Don't pretend, in your good-nature, not to have observed it!

MRS. JASPER, after a moment.

Amy justly resents yours, Sir Montagu.

SIR MONTAGU, blank.

Mine?

MRS. JASPER.

Your propensity to draw me into corners, and (as he still detains her) to contend with me there!

SIR MONTAGU.

It's only to discuss with you the situation she herself has created.

MRS. JASPER.

Is your view of this situation the result of your interview with Mrs. Wigmore?

SIR MONTAGU.

Flora deemed it her duty to speak to me—she's jealous of the family honour.

MRS. JASPER, after a pause, during which Sir MONTAGU continues the importunate pressure of the arm by which he has forced her to seat herself again.

Does the family honour demand (looking down at her arm) that you should appropriate so much of my arm? (He releases her with a promptly apologetic gesture, and she goes on.) It's very absurd, you know. Mr. Trafford, as you can easily see, is making himself agreeable to Blandina.

SIR MONTAGU, who has looked round with his eyeglass at the other group —BLANDINA and Captain PRIME close together on the settee, by the dimensions of which they are much compressed, while TRAFFORD has gone for a few moments, on business conspicuously connected with photography, into the house.

I beg your pardon, it's Captain Prime who is doing that!

MRS. JASPER, just visibly struck, retouching her sketch again.

Oh—*is* it?

SIR MONTAGU.

You can see for yourself!

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

I don't want to see!

SIR MONTAGU, sociable, taking it for granted.

So you'll remonstrate with Amy, won't you?

MRS. JASPER.

I must be sure of my facts first. These are things that a woman feels a delicacy in mentioning; but Mr. Trafford presents an unmistakable appearance—

SIR MONTAGU, attentive, as she pauses.

Yes?

MRS. JASPER.

Of not being indifferent to myself.

SIR MONTAGU, disconcerted.

Does he—the rascal?

MRS. JASPER.

You see we must be clear. If he's a rascal for me, he's not a rascal for Amy.

SIR MONTAGU, after an instant.

He takes you in rotation!

MRS. JASPER.

Everything, I admit, is grist to his mill! (Then after consideration.) Should you like me to localise his affection, so that Amy shall be safe?

SIR MONTAGU, embarrassed; then with decision.

On the contrary—make him universal!

MRS. JASPER, amused.

I like your provision for morality! (Rising.) I'll speak to Amy.

SIR MONTAGU, rising but reluctant; still keeping her.

Now, do you mean?

MRS. JASPER.

This very moment.

SIR MONTAGU, pleading.

But you'll come back to tell me what she says?

MRS. JASPER.

Why is that necessary?

SIR MONTAGU.

Surely we must talk it over.

MRS. JASPER, after looking at him an instant.

Does the "family honour" require it? (As he gives an embarrassed shrug she waves him off to the right.) Go and ask Mrs. Wigmore!

Exit Sir MONTAGU by the wooden gate. Mrs. JASPER goes up to the house, but as she approaches it, putting her sketch-book to rights, she drops a loose page, which Captain PRIME instantly perceives. He quits BLANDINA with alacrity, picks it up and hands it to her; she receives it with a gracious acknowledgment which makes a momentary passage between them, and goes into the house. PRIME, liberated from BLANDINA by this movement and by TRAFFORD'S return from the house simultaneously with Sir MONTAGU'S exit and before Mrs. JASPER'S, comes down to the left with an expression of extreme relief.

BLANDINA, still fast to her settee.

Don't forget, Captain Prime, that we're going to the ruins.

TRAFFORD, who has come down to the right.

Ah, you must do them; they're uncommonly fine!

BLANDINA, rising, advancing and taking her stand as if to recite a lesson.

One of the most celebrated sanctuaries of the Middle Ages; begun in the eleventh century, terminated in the fourteenth.

PRIME, down on the left; amazed.

I say!

BLANDINA.

Favourite burial-place of the Norman queens.

TRAFFORD, down on the right; to PRIME.

She's wonderful!

Re-enter Lady BRISKET from the house, with a cup of tea in her hand.

BLANDINA.

Injured by fire under Henry the Seventh; despoiled of its treasures under Henry the Eighth. (She returns to the settee.)

LADY BRISKET, who has stopped on the steps of the house to listen.

That deserves a cup of tea! (Coming away with her cup.) Captain Prime, please hand this to Miss Wigmore. (PRIME, at the left, hesitates an instant; then, with a sigh of desperate docility, comes and takes the cup from Lady BRISKET and carries it up to BLANDINA. TRAFFORD, hereupon, at an expressive look from Lady BRISKET, bounds from the right to her side; while, down at the centre, she breaks out to him, with intensity.) Take them together, it's important!

TRAFFORD, ardent.

Anything in life to gratify you.

LADY BRISKET.

It's not to gratify me, it's to gratify Flora. (Agitated. She suspects something.

TRAFFORD.

What does she suspect?

LADY BRISKET, dropping her eyes.

The intimacy of our friendship.

TRAFFORD, with energy, plausibility.

She exaggerates it!

LADY BRISKET.

She exaggerates it! We must keep her occupied with Blandina's marriage.

TRAFFORD.

To that simple soldier?

LADY BRISKET.

Flora's frantic to make him propose. If she knows we're working for her—

TRAFFORD, seizing her idea.

She'll leave us alone? (With intensity.) We'll work for her!

LADY BRISKET.

You're an angel! I'll send you out some tea.

TRAFFORD.

I don't want any tea, I want your society! Let me walk home with you.

LADY BRISKET.

I ordered the wagonette.

TRAFFORD.

So much the better: it will take the others. But I'll make him propose first.

LADY BRISKET.

In so many words?

TRAFFORD.

As many as you like!

LADY BRISKET, hesitating, then yielding.

Well, Montagu has *his* friends!

TRAFFORD.

They won't look at any one else.

LADY BRISKET, struck.

Won't they? (With decision.) Then I'll walk.

TRAFFORD.

Adorable woman!

LADY BRISKET, seeing Mrs. WIGMORE.

Be careful!

Re-enter Mrs. WIGMORE by the wooden gate, and stops a moment while she looks very hard at Lady BRISKET and PERCY TRAFFORD and at BLANDINA and Captain PRIME; the last of whom, at BLANDINA'S command, has again seated himself dejectedly beside her. Lady BRISKET rapidly returns to the house. TRAFFORD hurries back to his camera, and PRIME, at the sight of Mrs. WIGMORE, springs up and comes down again on the left.

TRAFFORD, at the camera, under the cloth of which he has hastily thrust his head.

Come, come, Captain—into position!

MRS. WIGMORE, crossing to the left and thereby causing PRIME to fly to the right.

Captain, into position!

TRAFFORD.

My dear fellow, we're waiting!

MRS. WIGMORE, on the stone bench, to PRIME.

My dear fellow, they're waiting!

TRAFFORD, who has come down to the right and taken possession of PRIME, carried him up and forced him down on the settee, close beside BLANDINA, where he settles him and poses him.

There now, the shoulder a little more presented.

MRS. WIGMORE, while she looks over the newspaper which she has taken up from beside her.

The shoulder a little more presented, Captain Prime.

TRAFFORD.

The cheek a little more inclined, Miss Wigmore.

MRS. WIGMORE.

The cheek a little more inclined, love.

TRAFFORD.

If Captain Prime could only wear a little happier expression!

MRS. WIGMORE.

Captain Prime, wear a little happier expression.

PRIME, with a perfunctory simper.

This way?

TRAFFORD.

That way! (Watch in hand.) Now keep perfectly still.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Keep perfectly still!

A short silence, during which enter CHARLES COVERLEY by the wooden gate, stopping with surprise at the scene, startled at the conjunction of Captain PRIME and BLANDINA. As this attitude and the silence are prolonged, PERCY TRAFFORD, very expressively, with the cover of the lens in one hand and his watch in the other, warns COVERLEY to be quiet. On this COVERLEY comes round on tiptoe to Mrs. WIGMORE.

COVERLEY, in a loud whisper.

Have you seen Mrs. Jasper?

MRS. WIGMORE.

Keep perfectly still.

COVERLEY, in the same way to TRAFFORD, who has his back still turned to the sitters.

Have *you* seen Mrs. Jasper?

TRAFFORD.

Keep perfectly still. (Another instant elapses, after which TRAFFORD, facing round again to PRIME and BLANDINA, claps the cover on the lens.) Now you may move—I'll go and develop it.

Exit TRAFFORD with the slide to the house.

COVERLEY, to PRIME, who, having sprung up from the settee, comes rapidly down with a fresh movement of relief.

Have *you* seen Mrs. Jasper?

PRIME, thinking an instant, as if bewildered and irritated with his ordeal.

You ask that too often!

COVERLEY, arresting BLANDINA, who comes down on the heels of PRIME.

Have *you* seen Mrs. Jasper?

BLANDINA.

She's in the house.

COVERLEY.

Thank you—I want to speak to her. (Going up.)

MRS. WIGMORE, who has risen when PRIME and BLANDINA rise.

Mr. Coverley, please stay here; Mrs. Jasper's occupied.

COVERLEY, sitting down on the steps of the house.

I'll wait till she's free.

MRS. WIGMORE, privately to BLANDINA.

Have you taken him to the ruins?

BLANDINA.

No, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Then take him immediately.

BLANDINA.

I want to see it developed.

MRS. WIGMORE.

I'll see it developed!

BLANDINA, to PRIME; seductive.

I think it's time for the ruins.

MRS. WIGMORE.

It's time for the ruins.

PRIME, to himself, dolorous.

Ill-omened name! (He surrenders his arm to BLANDINA.)

Exeunt PRIME and BLANDINA to the left.

MRS. WIGMORE, to COVERLEY, looking after them.

He has got what he wants!

COVERLEY.

Well, *I* haven't! May I go to Mrs. Jasper now?

MRS. WIGMORE.

Here she comes. (Re-enter Mrs. JASPER from the house with a cup of tea.) For whom is that cup of tea?

MRS. JASPER, smiling.

Not for you!

MRS. WIGMORE, with resentment.

I'll *have* some!

Exit Mrs. WIGMORE to the house.

COVERLEY.

Is it for me?

MRS. JASPER.

It's for Captain Prime.

COVERLEY, summarily; taking the tea from her.

He has got what he wants. (After drinking.) Where on earth have you been hiding?

MRS. JASPER, holding up her sketch-book.

Between the leaves of this.

COVERLEY, who has put down his cup on the stone bench.

Mayn't I see your work?

MRS. JASPER, surrendering the sketch-book.

I only came away for some tea: I'm going back to finish it.

COVERLEY.

Leaving me all alone?

MRS. JASPER, as Sir MONTAGU reappears.

You'll not be alone—here's Sir Montagu.

Re-enter Sir MONTAGU by the wooden gate.

SIR MONTAGU, to Mrs. JASPER.

Have you come across Amy?

MRS. JASPER.

I just left her in the house.

SIR MONTAGU.

With Mr. Trafford?

MRS. JASPER, reassuring, smiling.

Mr. Trafford's in the panelled room, developing.

SIR MONTAGU, startled.

Further?

MRS. JASPER.

I mean his plate!

SIR MONTAGU.

Then I can take her home.

MRS. JASPER.

Leave her; she's happy enough.

SIR MONTAGU.

I'm not "happy enough," Mrs. Jasper! (Possessing himself of her hand, which she puts out to him protestingly at this.) But thank heaven, *you're* a good woman! (Raises her hand to his lips and kisses it.)

Exit Sir MONTAGU to the house.

COVERLEY.

You never told me he makes love to you!

MRS. JASPER.

I don't betray you to each other.

COVERLEY.

What's the matter with him?

MRS. JASPER.

His wife worries him.

COVERLEY.

More than you worry me?

MRS. JASPER.

Naturally: I'm not your wife.

COVERLEY.

It's strange you should refuse to accept the position when you think of the opportunities it would give you.

MRS. JASPER.

I don't think of them, Mr. Coverley; I've other things to think of. Give me my sketch-book.

COVERLEY, still retaining it.

Mayn't I carry it for you?

MRS. JASPER.

No, you'll worry *me*, though you're not my husband.

COVERLEY.

Consider that if I were I shouldn't wish to render you these services. Marry me therefore to get rid of me.

MRS. JASPER.

It's a great temptation; but I don't quite want to kill you.

COVERLEY.

I'd willingly die for you. Haven't I behaved beautifully —not going to stay at Brisket?

MRS. JASPER.

How could you, when Amy didn't invite you?

COVERLEY.

She was just going to when you prevented her.

MRS. JASPER.

Much good it did me, with a rustic inn at the gates! I ought to have taken all the rooms.

COVERLEY.

Then where would poor Trafford have put up?

MRS. JASPER.

Instead of pairing with you there, he might have joined us at Brisket, where—though he's not scrupulous, I admit—a sense of what he owed to hospitality might have kept him straight. Will you do me a great favour, Mr. Coverley?

COVERLEY, considering.

What will you give me for a great favour?

MRS. JASPER.

You have influence with Mr. Trafford; persuade him therefore to leave this place. Persuade him to return to his post.

COVERLEY.

His post's at Copenhagen.

MRS. JASPER.

So much the better!

COVERLEY.

Very good; I'll talk to him to-night.

MRS. JASPER.

Talk to him on the spot—there's no time to lose. Do me this service; I'm very much in earnest.

COVERLEY.

And how will you reward me?

MRS. JASPER, after an instant; laughing.

By letting you live! (Takes her sketch-book and goes out by the great gate to the right.)

COVERLEY, alone, with a discouraged sigh, looking after her.

Ah, what's the use of life?

Re-enter Sir MONTAGU from the house.

SIR MONTAGU, to COVERLEY.

I have the honour to bid you good-bye.

COVERLEY.

You're going off?

SIR MONTAGU.

I'm going home.

COVERLEY.

Good-bye, Sir Montagu. (Exit Sir MONTAGU by the great gate to the left.) From which I infer that her ladyship declines to budge! I must really speak to Percy Trafford, if it will do any good. (After an instant.) Do *me* any good!

Re-enter Mrs. WIGMORE from the house.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Which way did my brother go?

COVERLEY.

He said he was going home.

MRS. WIGMORE.

I happen to have other views!

COVERLEY, as she hastily passes out of the great gate.

She'll drag him back! (Exit MRS. WIGMORE to the left. Re-enter PERCY TRAFFORD from the house and goes to take up from the ground a box of photographic plates which on his first entrance he has deposited near th camera.) What are you doing?

TRAFFORD, with his box, coming down.

Getting these for Lady Brisket.

COVERLEY.

And what is Lady Brisket doing?

TRAFFORD.

She's developing.

COVERLEY.

Let her develop alone. I want to talk to you!

TRAFFORD.

About Prime, you mean?—the way he's compromising that girl?

COVERLEY.

Is he compromising her?

TRAFFORD.

Horribly—unless he has intentions. (Going up.) Bye-bye!

COVERLEY.

As much as you're compromising Lady Brisket?

TRAFFORD, arrested, blank.

Who put such stuff into your head?

COVERLEY.

I see what I see.

TRAFFORD.

I don't then! (Coming down again.) I've simply repaid courtesy with sympathy, and hospitality with—

COVERLEY, as he hesitates.

Photography? I shall take you to the station to-morrow, but I should like to know first what you mean about the Captain.

TRAFFORD.

I simply mean that the Captain must offer marriage to Miss Wigmore. If you want to know why, go and look at that plate.

COVERLEY.

What's the matter with it?

TRAFFORD.

The matter with it is that it's coming out beautifully! When a gentleman presents himself to the recording angel, as I may call it, with a young lady's head on his

bosom, he creates expectations that must be definitely met! He gives a pledge. The Captain evidently recognises that: he's following the pledge up!

COVERLEY, rather impressed, but reflecting.

Following it up?

TRAFFORD.

At the ruins. (Looking at his watch.) They're not staying there for nothing.

COVERLEY.

Oh, they'll soon come back!

TRAFFORD.

Unless they're ashamed of the comment they've excited!

COVERLEY.

You ought to destroy the plate.

TRAFFORD.

Not for the world! I shall obtain a fine clear impression of it, on the exhibition of which the Captain will face the music.

COVERLEY.

Do you mean he'll propose?

TRAFFORD.

Certainly—he'll redeem his pledge.

COVERLEY.

He must believe in his pledge first.

TRAFFORD.

He can be made to believe in it.

COVERLEY.

Who's to make him? You?

TRAFFORD, after an instant.

You, my dear fellow.

COVERLEY.

Thank you! Why should I play him such a trick?

TRAFFORD.

Because he knows you—he looks up to you—he'll mind what you say.

COVERLEY.

All the more reason I shouldn't say what I oughtn't! *You* mind what I say—that'll do! (Going up.)

TRAFFORD, ironical.

Have you seen Mrs. Jasper?

COVERLEY, stopping short.

Is that your way of insinuating that she asked me to speak to you?

TRAFFORD

I'm much obliged to her for her interest!

COVERLEY.

Mrs. Jasper's interest is in Lady Brisket.

TRAFFORD.

I see! And yours is in Mrs. Jasper. That's the vicious circle!

COVERLEY.

Exactly; and it's why I should be delighted if I could get you to leave Lady Brisket alone.

TRAFFORD, after an instant.

I'll accommodate you in that way if you'll accommodate me in another—in the way I spoke of just now. (Then as COVERLEY appears not to follow.) If you'll give Miss Wigmore a lift!

COVERLEY.

What profit will you derive from Miss Wigmore's elevation?

TRAFFORD.

It will make Lady Brisket happy!

COVERLEY, laughing.

Ah, your particular conception of Lady Brisket's happiness is just what we don't want!

TRAFFORD.

What conception, particular or general, could be more innocent? If Mrs. Jasper takes an interest in Lady Brisket, Lady Brisket takes an interest in her niece. The girl's a martyr, with her terrible mother, and Lady Brisket would give everything to see her relieved. Prime's the man to relieve her, if it can only be made to come home to him. I say, Coverley, *make* it, and I'll let you lecture me by the hour!

COVERLEY.

"Make" it is easily said! You talk as if I were one of the fellows who make rabbits come out of their neckties.

TRAFFORD.

You've got such a light hand! Try a few hypnotic passes—an appeal to his higher feelings.

COVERLEY.

Questionable practices! What shall I gain by them?

TRAFFORD.

Calculate and see! You'll gain by them that Blandina will gain, that Lady Brisket will gain by Blandina's gain, and that Mrs. Jasper, whom you want to gratify, will gain by Lady Brisket's. You'll be able immediately to say to Mrs. Jasper—

COVERLEY, interrupting.

"That arch-humbug says he'll listen to me"? But what if you don't listen?

TRAFFORD.

I give you my honour I will! (Coaxingly.) My dear boy, I *am* listening—I *have* listened! If you'll put it into my power to demonstrate to Lady Brisket that I persuaded you to throw your weight into the scale, I'll (thinking a moment) take myself off on the spot. The words I mention will constitute on my part a disinterested, an exemplary farewell. Lady Brisket's not in danger, but since Mrs. Jasper does me the honour to think so, Mrs.

Jasper will rejoice in my departure, and it will all be a good note for yourself.

COVERLEY, as if half persuaded.

When will you go?

TRAFFORD, scratching his head an instant.

When will the Captain do *his* part?

COVERLEY.

Well—say it comes off to-night.

TRAFFORD.

Then I'll go to-morrow.

COVERLEY, still sceptical.

Why should I believe you?

TRAFFORD.

Because I've never deceived you.

COVERLEY.

Diplomatist! But it *won't* come off to-night.

TRAFFORD, with resolution.

Then I won't go to-morrow! (As Lady BRISKET reappears; with intention and calculation.) So much the better; she's too good to lose!

Re-enter Lady BRISKET from the house.

LADY BRISKET, between them.

Where's Captain Prime? I want to show him our result.

TRAFFORD.

Still at the ruins, pressing his suit.

LADY BRISKET.

Mr. Coverley, it's in the panelled room. Pronounce upon it!

COVERLEY.

Your result? (Having gone up to the house: from the steps.) I can at least pronounce on your process!

LADY BRISKET, preoccupied, resentful.

Montagu *hates* me—my life's a burden!

TRAFFORD, with ardent sympathy.

Let me help you to carry the load!

Re-enter Mrs. JASPER by the great gate from the right.

MRS. JASPER, to herself, as she hears him.

They're a Mutual Aid Society! (To the others.) I've spoiled my picture—I'm sick of life!

LADY BRISKET.

So am I!

TRAFFORD, to Mrs. JASPER.

It's not because she has spoiled *her* picture! Do go and see how it has come out.

MRS. JASPER.

Can't you bring it to me?

TRAFFORD.

It won't bear daylight.

MRS. JASPER, looking round her at the fading light and the slow moonrise.

Daylight's going. How shall I find it in the dark?

From this moment a clear autumn twilight, which has been just perceptibly gathering, slowly settles upon the scene, deepening toward the close of the act into dusk, with the glow of lights in the windows of the house.

LADY BRISKET.

Mr. Coverley will show you—in the panelled room.

MRS. JASPER, as COVERLEY reappears.

No, he won't—he has had his turn!

Re-enter COVERLEY from the house.

COVERLEY, privately to TRAFFORD.

It's pretty serious!

TRAFFORD, looking at his watch.

So is their protracted absence!

LADY BRISKET.

Is it time to go home?

MRS. JASPER.

Don't you hear the wagonette?

TRAFFORD, privately to Lady BRISKET.

Not for *us!*

MRS. JASPER, to Lady BRISKET.

My dear child, is there any one you can send for my traps?

COVERLEY, ardent.

Send *me!*

MRS. JASPER.

You won't find the way.

COVERLEY.

Come and show me.

MRS. JASPER.

I'll start you.

Mrs. JASPER and COVERLEY go up together to the great gate and stand there a moment talking. Then exit COVERLEY to the right.

LADY BRISKET.

What became of Montagu?

TRAFFORD.

I suppose he walked home.

LADY BRISKET.

And what became of Flora?

TRAFFORD.

Let us hope she did the same.

LADY BRISKET, as Sir MONTAGU and Mrs. WIGMORE reappear.

No such luck!

Re-enter Sir MONTAGU and Mrs. WIGMORE by the great gate from the right, joining Mrs. JASPER and coming down with her.

MRS. WIGMORE, to Lady BRISKET.

Your husband was going home, but I overtook him and brought him back.

SIR MONTAGU.

We've been taking it easy.

MRS. JASPER, at the steps of the house; gay.

The only way to take it! Mr. Coverley wants me to examine the group.

Exit Mrs. JASPER.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Amy, the wagonette's there.

LADY BRISKET.

The wagonette can wait! Blandina's still at the ruins.

MRS. WIGMORE, complacent.

In that case the wagonette must indeed wait!

SIR MONTAGU, looking at his watch, to Mrs. WIGMORE.

You ought to go for them.

MRS. WIGMORE, horrified.

"Go" for the sweet things? Barbarian! (Then to TRAFFORD.) Am I the only one who is not to examine the group? (To Lady BRISKET.) The least you can do, under the peculiar circumstances, is to place such a memento in my hands.

LADY BRISKET, gracious.

Dear Flora, you're welcome to our humble effort. (Privately to TRAFFORD.) Take her away!

TRAFFORD, to Mrs. WIGMORE, gallant.

Kindly accept my arm.

Exeunt TRAFFORD and Mrs. WIGMORE to the house.

SIR MONTAGU, after going up nervously and vaguely, looking about him and then coming down, while he again refers to his watch.

Amy, you had better go and sit in the carriage.

LADY BRISKET, on the stone bench.

Why should I do anything so uncomfortable?

SIR MONTAGU.

So as to be all ready to start.

LADY BRISKET.

I'm not in the least eager to start!

SIR MONTAGU.

We shall be shockingly late for dinner.

LADY BRISKET.

I ordered it for nine o'clock.

SIR MONTAGU.

Remember we've company.

LADY BRISKET.

The Stoners and the Spicers? They know the hour.

SIR MONTAGU.

How do you propose to occupy yourself till nine o'clock?

LADY BRISKET, after an instant.

I propose to walk home.

SIR MONTAGU.

With your "assistant?"

LADY BRISKET, with a nervous laugh.

To help me over the stiles!

SIR MONTAGU.

My dear child, you'll do nothing of the sort. Your assistant has doubtless been useful, but from this hour we'll dispense with his services. You'll give him notice.

LADY BRISKET.

After so much zeal?

SIR MONTAGU.

To prevent any more.

LADY BRISKET, seeing COVERLEY.

Be careful!

Re-enter CHARLES COVERLEY by the great gate from the right, with Mrs. JASPER'S small easel, paint-box and camp-stool, which he puts down by the gate.

COVERLEY.

The young couple are still absent?

SIR MONTAGU, looking once more at his watch.

Mr. Coverley, will you do me a particular favour? Will you go and fetch them?

COVERLEY, demurring.

Would it be discreet, Sir Montagu?

SIR MONTAGU.

Hang it then, I'll go myself!

Re-enter from the house Mrs. WIGMORE and PERCY TRAFFORD.

MRS. WIGMORE, on the steps, sharp.

Montagu, where are you going?

SIR MONTAGU.

To recover Blandina.

MRS. WIGMORE, coming down energetically and getting between him and the way to the ruins.

Over my prostrate form?

SIR MONTAGU.

Then what shall we do?

MRS. WIGMORE.

We'll simply wait.

LADY BRISKET.

It's only fair!

COVERLEY.

It's only decent!

TRAFFORD.

We must put ourselves in their place!

Re-enter Mrs. JASPER from the house.

MRS. JASPER.

Do you wait, Sir Montagu?

SIR MONTAGU.

I do exactly what you do.

MRS. JASPER.

You must do exactly the contrary. Don't look at me!

(Sir MONTAGU, with one of his vague shrugs of reluctant resignation, goes up restlessly to the great gate and stands there with his back turned, looking across the darkening valley. Mrs. WIGMORE seats herself beside Lady BRISKET on the stone bench. COVERLEY goes for Mrs. JASPER's camp-stool, on which she sits after he has placed it in the middle of the stage. TRAFFORD places himself on the steps of the house. COVERLEY brings one of the chairs and sits by Mrs. JASPER, who, on her camp-stool, goes on addressing him.) You're a faithful servant!

COVERLEY gratified.

Try me again!

MRS. JASPER.

If I had my way I'd send you for the truants.

MRS. WIGMORE, to Mrs. JASPER.

Respect their thoroughness. I've taught Blandina not to be superficial.

MRS. JASPER.

She profits by your instructions.

MRS. WIGMORE.

I've shown her how to study the monuments of our ancient national life.

MRS. JASPER.

And she's handing on the lesson to Captain Prime.

MRS. WIGMORE.

They're exploring an endless subject.

LADY BRISKET.

Poring over a delightful book.

TRAFFORD, smiling, approving.

With their heads, no doubt, very close together!

MRS. JASPER.

It's terrible to think of all they'll know!

TRAFFORD.

One of the most celebrated sanctuaries of the Middle Ages; begun in the eleventh century, terminated in the fourteenth.

MRS. WIGMORE, starting, recognising.

What's that?

TRAFFORD.

Favourite burial-place of the Norman queens.

MRS. WIGMORE, still more surprised.

How do *you* know?

TRAFFORD.

Injured by fire under Henry the Seventh—

MRS. WIGMORE, mystified and suspicious, interrupting and rising.

You've got it all wrong!

SIR MONTAGU, coming down to Mrs. JASPER.

Will *you* give me your company home? The wagonette can come back.

MRS. JASPER, rising, to Lady BRISKET.

Amy, won't you give us your society?

LADY BRISKET, rising.

I shouldn't dream of intruding on your privacy!

MRS. JASPER.

Our "privacy"? Dear Amy, I shall sit with the coachman.

SIR MONTAGU, to Mrs. JASPER.

I shall be the coachman, you know.

MRS. JASPER.

Then I'll sit inside. Won't you join us, Amy?

LADY BRISKET, turning away.

Montagu would manage to spill me.

SIR MONTAGU, to Mrs. JASPER.

I won't spill *you*. Leave her to her wicked ways!

MRS. JASPER, privately to COVERLEY.

Keep hold of Mr. Trafford.

COVERLEY, privately to TRAFFORD.

I'm watching you, my boy!

TRAFFORD.

Certainly you must stay—to put the Captain through.

COVERLEY, as he sees PRIME and BLANDINA reappear.

Well—for the woman I love!

Re-enter from the left BLANDINA and Captain PRIME.

SIR MONTAGU, impatient.

At last, young people—at last!

MRS WIGMORE, significant and suggestive.

Well, I must say, Captain Prime—!

MRS. JASPER, gay, to PRIME.

I've been hearing about your studies.

PRIME, blank.

My studies?

MRS. JASPER, smiling.

The Norman queens. We must talk them over.

PRIME, with alacrity.

Now, Mrs. Jasper?

MRS. WIGMORE.

No, not now. Another time.

MRS. JASPER, still smiling at PRIME.

Another time.

PRIME.

Another time.

BLANDINA, conscious, looking round at the company.

Have we been dreadfully long?

MRS. JASPER.

Not if you've seen everything.

SIR MONTAGU, to Mrs. JASPER, impatient.

Never mind what she has seen!

MRS. WIGMORE.

Excuse me. It's a case in which her mother wants to hear.

SIR MONTAGU, privately.

Then look after Amy. (To Mrs. JASPER.) Please take my arm.

MRS. JASPER, to Lady BRISKET.

Amy, wait for the return of the carriage. (Then coming down to COVERLEY.) Can I trust you to put her into it?

COVERLEY.

By force, if necessary. But I hate you to go.

MRS. JASPER, hesitating, looking round at Lady BRISKET; then as if still insufficiently satisfied.

I'll only go as far as the carriage—I'll come back.

She rejoins Sir MONTAGU and takes his arm, lingering while she does so for an instant during which she exchanges a fixed look with Lady BRISKET. Sir MONTAGU consciously avoids meeting his wife's eyes, and Lady BRISKET watches him while, at the great gate, he goes out to the left with Mrs. JASPER. Lady BRISKET then makes, in reference to them, a nervous, sarcastic gesture to TRAFFORD.

MRS. WIGMORE, to BLANDINA, while Lady BRISKET, TRAFFORD, and COVERLEY surround Captain PRIME.

Has he done it?

BLANDINA.

No, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Then you *are* a donkey!

BLANDINA.

Yes, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE, imperious.

Have it out on the spot!

BLANDINA, vague.

On what spot?

MRS. WIGMORE, looking about; then indicating the house.

Find one in there!

BLANDINA.

Yes, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Confront him with the picture.

BLANDINA.

Yes, mamma.

Exit BLANDINA to the house.

LADY BRISKET, to Mrs. WIGMORE, while COVERLEY and TRAFFORD remain with PRIME.

You had better be away.

MRS. WIGMORE, mistrustful.

And leave you to frisk?

LADY BRISKET.

Dear Flora, I'll go with you.

MRS. WIGMORE, indicating PRIME.

And what will become of that person?

LADY BRISKET.

They'll send him into the house. (To the others.) Excuse us, gentlemen; we're going to the old garden.

MRS. WIGMORE.

To gather some lavender.

Exeunt Mrs. WIGMORE and Lady BRISKET by the wooden gate, which TRAFFORD opens for them.

TRAFFORD, coming back to PRIME, who is at the right while COVERLEY is at the left.

My dear fellow, you *have* roused the tigress!

PRIME, startled.

The tigress?

COVERLEY.

Didn't you see how she packed her charming cub into the cage? She dissimulates for the moment, so as not to make the matter worse by a public scene.

TRAFFORD.

That's why Lady Brisket has dragged her off.

COVERLEY.

For fear she should break out!

TRAFFORD.

Sir Montagu and Mrs. Jasper fled before the storm.

COVERLEY.

Poor Miss Wigmore bowed her head.

PRIME, more and more blank, looking from one of his companions to the other.

Bowed it?

TRAFFORD.

To the maternal thunder.

COVERLEY.

You'll hear from her to-morrow.

PRIME.

From Miss Wigmore?

COVERLEY.

From Miss Wigmore's mamma. Jupiter tonans!

TRAFFORD.

It was a bad quarter of an hour.

COVERLEY.

The minutes were little blushing ages!

PRIME, bewildered.

The minutes? What minutes?

TRAFFORD.

Those of your abandonment.

PRIME.

Abandonment to what?

COVERLEY, laughing.

Would it be discreet of us to specify?

PRIME, with growing distress.

Tell me at least what you mean!

TRAFFORD.

Do you pretend it doesn't come home to you?

PRIME.

Home? I don't understand!

COVERLEY.

Isn't the situation plain?

PRIME, stupefied.

Plain?

COVERLEY.

Would you rather call it coloured?

TRAFFORD.

A scandal's always a scandal!

PRIME, aghast.

A scandal? Such as they talk about at the clubs?

TRAFFORD.

Or publish in the papers. From the moment you were so carried away by your feelings—

PRIME, distracted, indignant.

Feelings? I *have* no feelings!

COVERLEY, reproachful, edifying.

Doesn't it occur to you that that poor girl may have?

TRAFFORD.

She'll have a few when she finds she's compromised!

PRIME, to COVERLEY, appalled, appealing.

You don't mean to say she's *that?*

COVERLEY, for TRAFFORD; after looking at him a moment and then turning away and tossing down nervously a cigarette.

Hang it—it's beyond me!

TRAFFORD, to PRIME, more soothing.

Fortunately there's an easy way out.

PRIME.

An "easy" way?

TRAFFORD.

Easy for your honour. When you've excited expectations—

PRIME, breathless, as he pauses.

Yes, when I have?

TRAFFORD.

Why, you must meet them.

PRIME, blank.

And how in the world shall I meet them?

TRAFFORD.

By marrying your victim.

PRIME, with a despairing wail.

Mercy of heaven! (Grasping the arm of COVERLEY, who, recalled by this exclamation, comes down from the detachment in which, during the previous moments, he has stood.) Must I, on my honour; *must* I?

COVERLEY, faltering, hanging fire.

Must you what?

PRIME, desperately, while TRAFFORD passes round to COVERLEY'S right and BLANDINA reappears.

Must I make her my wife?

Re-enter BLANDINA from the house.

BLANDINA, on the steps.

Captain Prime!

PRIME, with a jump.

There she *is!* (Recovering himself.) Miss Wigmore?

BLANDINA.

Our picture looks so odd!

PRIME, between COVERLEY and TRAFFORD, and after looking in supreme anguish from one impenetrable face to the other.

I'll do what I can about it! But (to COVERLEY, suppliant) must I make her *that?*

TRAFFORD, privately, on COVERLEY'S right.

Nail him, and I'm off!

COVERLEY, after an instant.

Your wife, my dear fellow? You can't very well make her anything else!

BLANDINA, still on the steps.

Llewellyn!

PRIME.

Blandina!

Exit BLANDINA to the house. PRIME, smiting his forehead, makes a wild dash for it and follows her in.

TRAFFORD, while COVERLEY, who has gone up uneasily, stands listening near the house.

Now of course I'll go!

COVERLEY, with a reaction, already remorseful.

Go or stay—I wash my hands of it!

TRAFFORD.

Too late, my boy—they're imbrued!

COVERLEY, uneasily laughing.

With human gore? He won't come to the point.

TRAFFORD.

He's coming now!

COVERLEY, irritated.

Ah, but it isn't fair!

TRAFFORD.

My dear fellow, she's a charming girl.

COVERLEY.

Then marry her yourself!

TRAFFORD, with elation and as Lady BRISKET and Mrs. WIGMORE reappear.

Too late—too late!

Re-enter by the wooden gate Lady BRISKET and Mrs. WIGMORE.

MRS. WIGMORE, with a big bunch of lavender.

Where's Captain Prime?

COVERLEY.

In the house.

MRS. WIGMORE, passing anxiously up.

What's he doing?

TRAFFORD.

Coming to the point!

MRS. WIGMORE, starting, as a loud, droll shriek proceeds from the house.

Mercy on us!

TRAFFORD, laughing.

That's the "point"!

MRS. WIGMORE.

My precious child! (Makes a rush for the house, which she precipitately enters.)

TRAFFORD, to COVERLEY.

Blandina has accepted! (To Lady BRISKET, as COVERLEY, with quickened alarm, turns away.) Now we can go!

LADY BRISKET after an instant.

Well—if Flora's squared!

TRAFFORD gives her his arm while COVERLEY, with his back turned, listens again, intently, on the steps of the house; and they hurry out of the great gate to the right.

COVERLEY, alone, staring, convinced, coming down and across to the left.

Tremendous smacks? They're *kissing!*

Re-enter Mrs. JASPER through the great gate from the left.

MRS. JASPER, surprised.

Where are Lady Brisket and Mr. Trafford?

COVERLEY, startled, looking round, going up as she comes down.

Bless me—they've escaped!

MRS. JASPER, down at the left, disappointed, vexed.

You don't keep faith! (Re-enter, as she speaks, Mrs. WIGMORE from the house. Agitated, calling across to her.) They've escaped!

MRS. WIGMORE, radiant, jubilant, descending the steps.

No, they haven't! (With a gesture of happy majesty, indicating BLANDINA and Captain PRIME as they reappear.) Behold them! (Re-enter Captain PRIME and BLANDINA from the house; PRIME, pale and breathless, coming instantly down to the left of Mrs. JASPER, and BLANDINA, as he does so, arriving at the right of COVERLEY. Mrs. WIGMORE, between the two couples, looks with significant satisfaction from PRIME to BLANDINA and from COVERLEY to Mrs. JASPER; then with a kind of official grandeur she goes on.) I have the honour to announce to you a piece of news in which you'll both rejoice—my daughter's engagement to Captain Prime!

COVERLEY, overwhelmed.

Immortal gods! (Then agitatedly seizing Mrs. WIGMORE's wrist.) Is it true, Mrs. Wigmore?

MRS. WIGMORE, staring at him a moment in resentful surprise; then sarcastically to BLANDINA.

Is it "true," love?

BLANDINA.

Yes, mamma.

COVERLEY, passing with emotion to BLANDINA's right, while she, coming to Mrs. WIGMORE, throws herself into her arms; then to himself, smiting his forehead with extravagant compunction and despair.

What have I done—what have I done? (Dashes confusedly, to conceal his discomposure, into the house.)

PRIME, dazed, bewildered, with smothered anguish, at the extreme left, to Mrs. JASPER while Mrs. WIGMORE presses BLANDINA to her bosom.

Is it true, Mrs. Jasper?

MRS. JASPER, who on Mrs. WIGMORE's announcement has given the same shocked start as COVERLEY and an ejaculation inarticulate and, while she carries her hand a moment to her heart, instantly checked, looks at him, smiling intensely and with recovered self-control. Then with the lightest, gayest sarcasm.

You can't believe in your happiness? (Looks at him another instant; after which, laughing and with a mocking, ironical, extravagantly ceremonious curtsey.) Let it receive from *me*, the first, a hearty congratulation!

ACT SECOND

The hall at Brisket Place, soon after breakfast; large, light and bright, wainscotted and panelled in white, in the style of the last century. Last-century portraits and other features. At the back, facing the audience, a wide window, with the small panes of the period, looking into the court. On a line with it, to the left, a double door leading through a vestibule to the court. High up to the right a double door leading to the staircase and other parts of the house. Lower down, on the left, a door leading into the so-called Red Room. Down on the right, corresponding with this, the door to the library. Down toward the left, with its back presented to the audience, a writing-table completely appointed.

BLANDINA comes out of the library, meeting CHARLES COVERLEY, who bursts in from the Red Room.

COVERLEY, eager, feverish.

Have you seen Mrs. Jasper?

BLANDINA, surprised.

Why, where have you come from?

COVERLEY.

I've been rushing about—I came in by the glass doors. *Have* you seen Mrs. Jasper?

BLANDINA.

Not since breakfast.

COVERLEY, disappointed.

You should keep her in sight! (Seeing TRAFFORD—enter PERCY TRAFFORD from the court.) Have *you* seen Mrs. Jasper?

TRAFFORD.

By the river, sketching. (Complacently.) She put me into it!

COVERLEY, irritated.

Into the river, I hope!

TRAFFORD.

Into the sketch.

BLANDINA.

That's a great compliment.

TRAFFORD, smiling.

Oh, yes, to the sketch!

COVERLEY, with rueful confidence.

Art's her only love! (Hurries off to the court.)

TRAFFORD.

He *must* want to see her—he left our little inn while I was still in bed.

BLANDINA, dropping her eyes.

When people are in love they get up early.

TRAFFORD, laughing.

Is that why Miss Wigmore's afoot?

BLANDINA, demure.

I rose at six.

TRAFFORD.

I rose at seven! But there must be some exception to the rule, if Captain Prime isn't here.

BLANDINA.

Is Captain Prime in love?

TRAFFORD.

I supposed he was, or I shouldn't have come over at this hour to congratulate both of you on your engagement.

BLANDINA, raising her eyes to him.

That's *not* what you came over for—at this hour!

TRAFFORD, surprised.

There's more in you, Miss Wigmore, than meets the eye. Why then did I come?

BLANDINA.

To see my aunt.

TRAFFORD, smiling.

Your acuteness, I confess, surprises me. But it's a matter of course to ask Lady Brisket how she finds herself after her walk.

Enter, as he speaks, Mrs. WIGMORE from the stairs.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Spare at least the innocence of a young woman scarce affianced! (To BLANDINA.) Captain Prime hasn't come?

BLANDINA.

No, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Is the Red Room empty?

BLANDINA.

Yes, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Then go there to receive him.

BLANDINA.

Yes, mamma.

Exit BLANDINA to the Red Room.

TRAFFORD, all urbanity.

As I was eager to congratulate Miss Wigmore, so I'm eager to congratulate you!

MRS. WIGMORE, after an instant; incorruptible.

Stuff and nonsense!

TRAFFORD, disconcerted but conciliatory.

I should think your impressions would reach you through the medium of your happiness.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Great as it is, it doesn't deprive me of my senses.

TRAFFORD.

The more senses, Mrs. Wigmore, the more sympathies.

MRS. WIGMORE.

And the more sympathies, I suppose, the more scandals. You must have been sympathetic last night!

TRAFFORD, blank.

Last night?

MRS. WIGMORE.

While we were waiting for you—blushing for you.

TRAFFORD.

Blushing?

MRS. WIGMORE.

Keeping the dinner till ten o'clock, with the Stoners and the Spicers looking at each other.

TRAFFORD, with hopeless gaiety and gallantry.

I should have thought they'd been looking at *you!* We were indeed a little late: we found our walk so beguiling.

MRS. WIGMORE.

That was Amy's remarkable expression.

TRAFFORD.

Dear Mrs. Wigmore, you're not grateful.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Grateful for what?

TRAFFORD.

For your extraordinary windfall. I mean you're not indulgent.

MRS. WIGMORE.

To criminal frivolity, to public indecorum? Why should I be?

TRAFFORD.

You exaggerate awfully.

MRS. WIGMORE.

As the fireman exaggerates when he plays the hose!

TRAFFORD, with futile mirth.

Oh, I shall not resist a stream of water! I shall go next month.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Why not next year? Every hour that you stay she'll pay for.

TRAFFORD, pleading.

Ah, don't say that!

MRS. WIGMORE.

She'll pay for this.

TRAFFORD, vague.

This?

MRS. WIGMORE.

Your being here now.

TRAFFORD, with a change of tone, seeing Lady BRISKET.

She'll pay *me;* here she comes to do it!

Enter Lady BRISKET from the Red Room.

LADY BRISKET, while she nods to TRAFFORD.

Flora, darling, you'll be pleased to know that Captain Prime has turned up.

TRAFFORD, warningly.

Oh, Mrs. Wigmore takes her pleasure sadly!

MRS. WIGMORE.

I take it as some others would be the better for taking theirs—modestly! (Then to Lady Brisket, indicating the Red Room with her thumb.) Is he in there?

LADY BRISKET.

I met him at the door and showed him in myself.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Then I won't intrude.

LADY BRISKET.

Don't miss him—he may show himself out.

MRS. WIGMORE, at the door of the Red Room, listening; then quickly opening it.

Captain!

Exit rapidly Mrs. Wigmore

TRAFFORD.

That's no use—she's awful.

LADY BRISKET.

Awful enough to *him*. But I shall worry her with him, and it will make a diversion till you get off.

TRAFFORD.

Dear friend, do you banish me?

LADY BRISKET.

Montagu insists on it. We had a fearful battle.

TRAFFORD.

Last night, when you came back?

LADY BRISKET.

On this spot, after every one had gone. He says the Stoners and the Spicers will do for me.

TRAFFORD, blank.

Do what for you?

LADY BRISKET.

Bruit it abroad—our belated, our beautiful walk.

TRAFFORD.

What matters, since it *was* beautiful? We must have another.

LADY BRISKET.

Not at present. You must leave the place.

TRAFFORD, insisting.

If I go up to London we'll have one there.

LADY BRISKET, vague.

In Oxford Street?

TRAFFORD.

In Kensington Gardens, in Battersea Park. (Suggestive.) You'll join me for a day.

LADY BRISKET.

Not for a minute.

TRAFFORD, pleading.

It will be our good-bye.

LADY BRISKET.

This is our good-bye.

TRAFFORD.

So inadequate, so brief?

LADY BRISKET.

Make it briefer: catch the train!

TRAFFORD.

I'll go back to the inn to see to my things. But I'll return for another word.

LADY BRISKET.

You won't get it.

TRAFFORD.

For another look, then—an hour hence.

LADY BRISKET.

Montagu's coming—go, go! (She hurries him to the door to the court, urging him off. He snatches one of her hands, to kiss it; then exit quickly to the court. Lady Brisket comes down as her husband appears at the door of the library.)

Enter Sir MONTAGU from the library, dressed for a ride; with his hat on and pulling on his gloves.

SIR MONTAGU.

Before I go out, there's another point I should like to make clear.

LADY BRISKET.

Another? That will make about the fiftieth!

SIR MONTAGU.

To match the number of your indiscretions! What I want to say is that I shall not be satisfied with a merely general assurance that Mr. Trafford will absent himself from our neighbourhood.

LADY BRISKET.

Should you like a witnessed paper?

SIR MONTAGU.

I should like a distinct pledge that during the next few days he will have placed the breadth of Europe between us.

LADY BRISKET.

Between you and me?

SIR MONTAGU.

Between himself and our distracted home! As many miles as it may be to Copenhagen.

LADY BRISKET, after a silence.

If I'm to go into these refinements, it will be necessary for me to meet Mr. Trafford.

SIR MONTAGU.

You can acquit yourself perfectly by a note—you have plenty of servants to carry one.

LADY BRISKET.

If I may not transact the business with decent courtesy I decline to transact it at all.

SIR MONTAGU, buttoning his glove.

There are many things more decent than your courtesy!

LADY BRISKET.

Your language, for instance?

SIR MONTAGU.

Amy—I don't trust you.

LADY BRISKET.

I know whom you trust! (She goes up, meeting CHARLES COVERLEY, who re-enters on the rush from the court.)

COVERLEY, panting.

Have you seen Mrs. Jasper?

LADY BRISKET.

Ask my husband!

COVERLEY, to Sir MONTAGU.

Have *you* seen Mrs. Jasper?

SIR MONTAGU.

Unfortunately not.

COVERLEY, indicating suggestively the Red Room.

Would she be in there?

LADY BRISKET.

By no means.

COVERLEY, indicating suggestively the library.

Would she be in there?

SIR MONTAGU.

She wasn't just now.

COVERLEY, embarrassed.

She has such a talent for hiding!

LADY BRISKET.

You haven't Sir Montagu's talent for finding her!

SIR MONTAGU, indicating the library.

She may have passed in since.

COVERLEY, at the door of the library.

I'll just look.

SIR MONTAGU.

There's a suite of rooms beyond—look further.

COVERLEY.

Thank you, Sir Montagu.

Exit COVERLEY to the library.

SIR MONTAGU.

He runs in and out of the house as if it were a railway station.

LADY BRISKET.

He's always missing the train!

SIR MONTAGU, in thought a moment longer, with his eyes on his wife, while he finishes buttoning his glove.

Write to that fellow austerely. Do you understand?

Exit Sir MONTAGU to the court.

LADY BRISKET, alone.

I understand! I'll write to him, but *I'll* deliver the letter!

Enter from the Red Room Mrs. JASPER, with several letters in her hand.

MRS. JASPER.

I came in that way, but I'm not wanted!

LADY BRISKET.

Is Flora there?

MRS. JASPER.

Marching up and down outside.

LADY BRISKET.

So as to leave Blandina free?

MRS. JASPER.

To make eyes at Captain Prime!

LADY BRISKET.

And whom are *you* going to make eyes at?

MRS. JASPER, smiling, goodhumoured, holding up her letters.

My correspondents! But don't tell me I'm not a woman of order when I've dragged myself home to catch the midday post.

LADY BRISKET.

I'll leave it to your correspondents to praise you. You seem to have enough!

MRS. JASPER, counting her letters.

One, two, three, four, *nine!* But they won't all "praise" me, I can assure you.

LADY BRISKET.

Are you going to be very severe?

MRS. JASPER.

Inordinately!

LADY BRISKET.

You keep your severity for your letters.

MRS. JASPER, after an instant, smiling.

Try to do the same, my dear, with yours!

LADY BRISKET.

I *have* something odious to write. I'll do it in the library.

MRS. JASPER.

Then may I write here?

LADY BRISKET.

Certainly. (After an instant.) It's a good place for your other friends to find you.

MRS. JASPER, with a little comical wail.

Ah, don't tell me they're looking for me!

LADY BRISKET, at the door of the library.

There's one of them here that I'll send you.

Exit Lady BRISKET.

MRS. JASPER, alone.

"One of them"? Sir Montagu?—I'll send him straight back to her! (At the writing-table, seeing COVERLEY: re-enter CHARLES COVERLEY from the library.) I'm sorry to see you, but you might be worse!

COVERLEY, breathless.

Do you fully realise what has happened to the Captain?

MRS. JASPER, vague.

The Captain?

COVERLEY.

The unfortunate, the miserable Prime!

MRS. JASPER.

Oh, his engagement! (After an instant.) "Fully realise" it? Mrs. Wigmore would box my ears if I didn't!

COVERLEY.

Box hers! It's too awful!

MRS. JASPER, occupying herself at the writing-table.

Awful for whom?

COVERLEY.

Why for me!

MRS. JASPER.

Do you want Blandina for yourself?

COVERLEY.

You know whom I want for myself!

MRS. JASPER, getting settled at her letters.

Ah, don't make love to me!

COVERLEY.

You're clever, you're ingenious, you're sympathetic, you're benevolent.

MRS. JASPER.

Don't—I beseech you!

COVERLEY.

Therefore you must interfere.

MRS. JASPER.

Do you call that benevolent?

COVERLEY.

It would be to me.

MRS. JASPER.

What have you to do with it?

COVERLEY.

Everything!

MRS. JASPER, blank, writing.

Everything?

COVERLEY.

More than enough for remorse. I drove him to it, I made him believe it was his duty.

MRS. JASPER, gay.

Well, perhaps it was!

COVERLEY.

I'll be hanged if it was!

MRS. JASPER.

Then why did you tell him so?

COVERLEY.

To please *you*—to make you like me.

MRS. JASPER.

It does nothing of the sort!

COVERLEY.

Of course it doesn't—it can't! (Desperately.) Therefore you must just undo my work.

MRS. JASPER.

Thank you—I must do my own!

COVERLEY.

You must invent something; you must help me.

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

I must simply understand you—first!

COVERLEY.

It happened last evening, after you and Sir Montagu went home. Trafford and I were there with the deluded being, and we convinced him that by their long dawdle at the ruins, after dark, you know, he had fatally compromised that girl.

MRS. JASPER, astonished, amused.

Compromised Blandina? What a funny idea!

COVERLEY.

So it seemed to me then; but in this morning's light—the cold, hard light of reality—it's simply dreadful. You told me to talk to Trafford, to get him to go away. I obeyed your commands, and he promised me he'd go if I would help him to pacify Mrs. Wigmore, who, as you know, has more than suspected his flirtation with her sister-in-law. The way to pacify her was to bribe her, and the way to bribe her was to make the poor Captain propose to her daughter. Trafford gave me his word he would go if I would bring on this event. I had only your wishes in mind; so, in spite of the difficulty, which was immense, I did bring it on.

MRS. JASPER.

But Mr. Trafford hasn't gone.

COVERLEY.

That's *his* look-out! I exerted myself.

MRS. JASPER.

To what purpose, pray, since, within the hour, he was to expose poor Amy to such comments?

COVERLEY.

The comments are your affair, if you helped to make them. I only went too far for you.

MRS. JASPER.

Yes (impatiently, looking over her papers) how could you be such a noodle?

COVERLEY.

An opprobrious name is all my thanks?

MRS. JASPER.

You must look for your thanks to Blandina.

COVERLEY.

Blandina be dashed! In a moment of criminal aberration I've sacrificed my innocent friend.

MRS. JASPER.

How could *he* be such a noodle?

COVERLEY.

He isn't a noodle, he's a snow-white lamb. You should have seen him when he fixed his blue eyes on me and bleated: "For my honour, for hers, must I?"

MRS. JASPER.

The honour of a lamb—it's too lovely!

COVERLEY.

I feel as if I'd sent him to the butcher.

MRS. JASPER.

Your comparison is rude to Blandina. She's an estimable girl.

COVERLEY.

She isn't a girl, she's a parrot. The Captain loathes her.

MRS. JASPER.

Then how could he attach her for life?

COVERLEY.

Because he's a hero.

MRS. JASPER.

To be eaten with mint-sauce? He should be kept at least for mutton!

COVERLEY.

We must save him, we must get him off. And *you* must find a way.

MRS. JASPER, taking up her pen again.

I've no time; I've my letters to write.

COVERLEY.

Yesterday you asked me a favour; to-day I ask *you* one.

MRS. JASPER.

Ah, they're not equal!

COVERLEY.

This one's the easiest. You wanted me to interfere for Lady Brisket, who's a silly woman. I want you to interfere for Llewellyn Prime, who's a brave man.

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

If he's so awfully brave why don't you leave him to his fate?

COVERLEY.

Because his fate's horrid and his character noble.

MRS. JASPER, rising after an instant; then by degrees quitting the table.

Is he so extraordinarily nice?

COVERLEY.

You've seen him yourself.

MRS. JASPER.

Only a few times.

COVERLEY.

Then don't you like him?

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

Yes, he lets me alone! (After another moment.) He must be quite original.

COVERLEY.

To let you alone? I should think so!

MRS. JASPER.

No, I mean with his fastidious sense of honour. Most men have none at all.

COVERLEY.

He's different from most men; he's a *preux chevalier*, a knight of romance.

MRS. JASPER.

I see, he's a type. I'm rather interested in types. (After an instant.) Why don't you go to him and tell him frankly you made a fool of him?

COVERLEY.

That would only commit me the more to save him.

MRS. JASPER.

Let alone that he might knock you down! Then go to Blandina.

COVERLEY.

Who in that case would save *me?*

MRS. JASPER.

Go to Mrs. Wigmore.

COVERLEY, seeing Mrs. Wigmore.

I needn't.

Re-enter Mrs. Wigmore from the Red Room.

MRS. WIGMORE, who has paused a moment, sternly and suspiciously, at the sight of the others, and then advanced majestically, passing in front of them and looking at them up and down.

Excuse me.

MRS. JASPER, gay, going back to her table.

Don't mention it!

MRS. WIGMORE.

I left Lady Brisket here, and I left Mr. Trafford.

COVERLEY, irritated at the interruption; as Mrs. Wigmore looks round.

They're not under the sofa!

MRS. WIGMORE.

May I presume to inquire what has become of them?

MRS. JASPER.

I happen to know that Amy's in the library.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Alone?

MRS. JASPER.

Alone. (Then, as Mrs. WIGMORE stands looking at her searchingly, as if to challenge this statement.) If you don't believe me, you can go and see.

MRS. WIGMORE, back at the door of the Red Room.

I never impose an unappreciated presence.

Exit Mrs. WIGMORE.

MRS. JASPER, laughing.

Delicacy! (Coming down again.) Poor Captain Prime—I do pity him.

COVERLEY.

Then for pity's sake be suggestive, be inspired! Find some way to get him off.

MRS. JASPER, abrupt; after a moment's thought.

Where's Mr. Trafford?

COVERLEY, disconcerted, impatient.

What has *he* got to do with it?

MRS. JASPER.

You promised you'd take him away.

COVERLEY.

Oh yes, I'll take him! Give me time.

MRS. JASPER.

That policeman in petticoats will pull down the house.

COVERLEY.

I'll take him to-morrow.

MRS. JASPER.

You must take him to-day.

COVERLEY.

To-day I must save the Captain.

MRS. JASPER, abrupt again; after another moment's quick, intense meditation.

Mr. Coverley, I'll tell you what I'll do. If you'll save Amy, *I'll* save the Captain!

COVERLEY, vague.

How can *I* save Amy?

MRS. JASPER.

Take Mr. Trafford back to his post.

COVERLEY.

"Take" him—all the way?

MRS. JASPER.

Put him on the ship.

COVERLEY.

You don't go to Copenhagen on a ship.

MRS. JASPER.

Well, whatever you do go on! And book his luggage through.

COVERLEY.

Very good—to-night.

MRS. JASPER.

Don't wait till to-night; do it to-day. Do it this morning; do it this minute. Lay hands on him; push him off!

COVERLEY, encouraged but bargaining.

And if I do, you'll rescue my victim?

MRS. JASPER.

I'm not a shepherdess, but I'll do what I can for the blue-eyed lamb.

COVERLEY.

Ah, don't laugh at him!

MRS. JASPER.

I mean for the knight of romance.

COVERLEY.

I shall love you still better.

MRS. JASPER.

That's a circumstance that rather takes it out of me.

COVERLEY.

Oh, I shall be quiet! But how will you operate?

MRS. JASPER.

I must think it over; I shall find a way.

COVERLEY, participating.

Yes, why else should you be so clever? It will be my right to worship you, as it will be my occupation to reward.—I'll go to the inn; I'll catch hold of Trafford.

MRS. JASPER.

Go quickly!

COVERLEY.

I'll pack him off, and I'll come back and tell you.

MRS. JASPER.

You needn't come back.

COVERLEY, going up.

How else shall I see how you're getting on?

MRS. JASPER.

Before you go, at any rate, tell me this. Is he absolutely (after a pause) all you say?

COVERLEY.

He's only too much of a gentleman. That's why he put himself out.

MRS. JASPER.

But he must be strangely simple.

COVERLEY.

He's not too simple to suffer.

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

He mustn't suffer!

COVERLEY, at the door to the court.

He mustn't, exactly! If he wasn't such a good sort I shouldn't care.

Exit COVERLEY to the court.

MRS. JASPER, alone.

Neither should I! (Going to the table, shuffling her letters together, and putting them into her pocket.) My correspondence is nipped in the bud. (Coming down, uncertain, and continuing to turn over COVERLEY's appeal in her mind.) He must indeed be a knight of romance; he must indeed be a gentleman. And if he's simple, I like simple people. Well, if I'm to find a way, where shall I find it? Oughtn't I to converse with him first, to sound him, to observe him? Yes, that's the right beginning. But how can I converse with him under Mrs. Wigmore's guns?

Re-enter Lady BRISKET from the library, with a sealed and directed letter.

LADY BRISKET.

I've written my letter, and it may relieve your solicitude to know that it's to Mr. Trafford.

MRS. JASPER.

Has he already gone away?

LADY BRISKET.

No, but he's going.

MRS. JASPER.

You're taking time by the forelock.

LADY BRISKET.

Montagu ordered me to write.

MRS. JASPER.

You've just missed an opportunity to send your letter; Mr. Coverley would have taken it.

LADY BRISKET.

It doesn't matter; I mean to give it myself.

MRS. JASPER.

You'll surely not see Mr. Trafford again?

LADY BRISKET.

He's coming to bid me good-bye.

MRS. JASPER.

I beseech you not to permit it!

LADY BRISKET.

Not when he's going so far?

MRS. JASPER.

How far?

LADY BRISKET, after an hesitation.

To Copenhagen.

MRS. JASPER.

Direct?

LADY BRISKET.

You must get the details from Mr. Trafford.

MRS. JASPER.

Let me *have* your letter then; I'll give it to him.

LADY BRISKET.

After you've shown it to Montagu for approval?

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

My poor dear, you're in a bad way!

LADY BRISKET.

Do you mean that you'll tell him of our meeting? (As Mrs. JASPER hesitates a moment.) You'll have plenty of opportunities.

MRS. JASPER.

I don't think you know what you say.

LADY BRISKET.

I know, for the most part, what *you* say; and that will do as well.

MRS. JASPER.

It will do best of all, I think, that I should bring my visit to a close.

LADY BRISKET.

So that I shall appear to have been rude to you?

MRS. JASPER.

You wouldn't be if you understood me a little better.

LADY BRISKET.

You make me feel then that in losing your company—

MRS. JASPER.

You lose that opportunity? We'll wait for a better one and I'll go as soon as possible.

LADY BRISKET.

Are you sure Montagu will consent?

MRS. JASPER, up at the window.

Here he comes. (Smiling, coming down.) I can ask him!

LADY BRISKET, at the door to the stairs.

Remind him that he can follow you!

Exit Lady BRISKET to the stairs.

MRS. JASPER, alone, struck.

He *may* follow me; it's an awful thought. (Thinking.) But it's the smaller risk; I'll fly. (Then suddenly checked, thinking again.) Dear me, if I fly, what will become of the snow-white lamb? Shall I forsake him? (After another pause.) No, I won't forsake him; I'll first see him. (Re-enter Sir MONTAGU from the court.) Have you been to ride?

SIR MONTAGU.

Only a mile. I didn't enjoy it; I came back to see you.

MRS. JASPER.

If you had been good enough to go another mile I might have got away.

SIR MONTAGU, vague.

Away where?

MRS. JASPER.

I'm bringing my visit to a close.

SIR MONTAGU, indignant.

What folly! When?

MRS. JASPER.

As soon as I've made my preparations.

SIR MONTAGU.

Your principal preparation will be to reconcile your host to the idea, and that will take at least a week.

MRS. JASPER.

I've stayed a week too long. You know my reason.

SIR MONTAGU.

Your reason for having stayed, of course!

MRS. JASPER.

My reason for going now.

SIR MONTAGU, horrified.

This morning?

MRS. JASPER.

In an hour or two. You've your own behaviour to thank.

SIR MONTAGU, pleading.

Remain to abuse it—if you'll only remain!

MRS. JASPER.

I've much more interesting work in hand, and the foolish advantage you try to find in my presence only gives Amy an excuse more foolish still.

SIR MONTAGU, suspicious, scandalised.

Has Amy been capable of a failure of courtesy?

MRS. JASPER.

Amy's failures don't signify, but there might be much to say about some of yours. You take exactly the wrong way with her.

SIR MONTAGU.

Stay to show me the right one!

MRS. JASPER.

You should be the first to be faultless.

SIR MONTAGU.

Let me study you as a model for that!

MRS. JASPER.

Study me at a distance. It's forty miles, thank heaven, to London!

SIR MONTAGU.

Are you going home? (After an instant, with decision.) I'll come up for your advice!

MRS. JASPER, weary, sad.

I've no more to give you. You've worn out your pretext!

SIR MONTAGU.

It has not *been* a pretext, Mrs. Jasper. (After an instant.) I swear that I love my wife!

MRS. JASPER.

Do you think I would have staid here three days if I didn't know it? She loves you too, and that's why you so ingeniously torment each other. But you must do so without my help, and (gently, but very firmly) this conversation, please, must end.

SIR MONTAGU.

Won't you see me before you go?

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

Yes, if you'll do me a service. (Indicating the Red Room.) Go and take Blandina out.

SIR MONTAGU, vague.

Out where?

MRS. JASPER.

Into the garden—for a little talk.

SIR MONTAGU, blank.

Can Blandina talk?

MRS. JASPER.

No, but you know *you* can!

SIR MONTAGU.

What about?

MRS. JASPER.

Your favourite subject, the duties of a wife. You might change it to-day for the duties of a husband!

SIR MONTAGU, at the door of the Red Room.

I shall not at least neglect the duties of a host!

Exit Sir MONTAGU.

MRS. JASPER, alone.

You exaggerate them! (Then thoughtful.) Cruel to dash the cup from Blandina's lips! But I won't let her die of thirst. (With an irrepressible start, as PRIME reappears.) Heavens! (Enter Captain PRIME from the Red Room.) Are you ill?

PRIME, pale, constrained, agitated.

I'm not particularly well.

MRS. JASPER, with genuine concern.

You look quite emaciated!

PRIME.

I daresay I *have* lost weight.

MRS. JASPER.

Since yesterday? You must get it back!

PRIME.

I don't miss it—I feel heavy enough.

MRS. JASPER.

I promised Mr. Coverley I would speak to you.

PRIME.

Your voice will be a blessed change.

MRS. JASPER, smiling.

Are you already tired of matrimony?

PRIME.

I feel as if I had been married ten years!

MRS. JASPER.

Then I'm a little late to congratulate you. It was for that I asked to see you.

PRIME.

Don't you remember that you congratulated me yesterday?

MRS. JASPER, remembering.

So I did! You see I keep at it.

PRIME.

Do keep at it, Mrs. Jasper—it prevents any one else. (Then as if uneasily hearing a sound from the Red Room.) There *is* some one.

MRS. JASPER, listening.

Blandina?

PRIME, comforted.

No—*she's* gone out.

MRS. JASPER.

She'll be back in time.

PRIME.

For the day? It isn't fixed. (Then with another start of anxiety.) Won't Mrs. Wigmore come?

MRS. JASPER.

To fix it? If she does I'll protect you!

PRIME, rueful.

You should have protected me yesterday.

MRS. JASPER.

Alas, I was taken up!

PRIME.

Of course you're in high demand.

MRS. JASPER.

Yes—people seem to want me.

PRIME.

I hope no one will want you now.

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

I shan't care if they do! (After another instant.) I can deal with them!

PRIME.

Oh, yes—you have your resources!

MRS. JASPER, laughing.

The resources of the hunted animal!

PRIME, with eager sympathy.

Are *you* hunted too?

MRS. JASPER.

All the year round!

PRIME.

But you told me about your refuge.

MRS. JASPER.

My sketching? Oh, I've a better refuge than that!

PRIME, with intense curiosity.

What is it?

MRS. JASPER.

My indifference!

PRIME.

Ah, I've tried indifference; but it isn't enough!

MRS. JASPER, thinking, conceding.

No, it isn't exactly a regular occupation. It isn't, after all, absorbing.

PRIME.

I want to be absorbed—I want something to take hold of!

MRS. JASPER.

Take hold (vaguely) take hold—! (Suddenly checking herself.)

PRIME, all attention.

Yes?

MRS. JASPER, to herself, turning away.

I really can't tell him to take hold of *me!*—Isn't your profession an occupation?

PRIME.

Only in the sense of being an exposure!

MRS. JASPER, reflecting.

Well, we must find something. Something very safe.

PRIME.

There can be nothing so safe as a quiet corner and a box of water-colours.

MRS. JASPER, thoughtful.

Yes, they're a kind of burrow!

PRIME.

A burrow is what I require.

MRS. JASPER.

I see. (Then after an instant.) You must come down into mine!

PRIME earnest.

Is there room in it for two?

MRS. JASPER, smiling.

With mutual accommodation! I'll give you lessons.

PRIME, delighted, eager.

Will you give me one now?

MRS. JASPER, suddenly embarrassed.

Now?

PRIME.

It's the time of all times!

MRS. JASPER, disconcerted.

The time I'm going away?

PRIME, alarmed.

Away? (Then with decision.) All you've got to do is to wait!

MRS. JASPER, after a moment.

I *will* wait—just to begin. We must therefore begin immediately. If you'll excuse me, I'll go and get our materials.

PRIME.

Don't be long!

MRS. JASPER, gay, at the door to the stairs.

Don't run away!

Exit Mrs. JASPER.

PRIME, alone.

Never from *you!* (Then as Mrs. WIGMORE reappears.) Caught!

Re-enter Mrs. WIGMORE from the Red Room.

MRS. WIGMORE, struck, staring.

Pray, where's Blandina?

PRIME.

Sir Montagu took her out.

MRS. WIGMORE.

Out where?

PRIME.

I haven't the least idea.

MRS. WIGMORE.

It's a point on which, in your position, you ought to be perfectly clear.

PRIME.

I've a general confidence in uncles.

MRS. WIGMORE.

I haven't any confidence in anybody!

Re-enter CHARLES COVERLEY from the court.

COVERLEY, to Mrs. WIGMORE.

Have you seen Mrs. Jasper?

MRS. WIGMORE.

I'm not her keeper!

COVERLEY, reaching PRIME.

Have *you* seen Mrs. Jasper?

PRIME.

Here she is!

Re-enter from the stairs Mrs. JASPER, with a box of water-colour paints and a sketching-block.

COVERLEY, rushing to her while Mrs. WIGMORE confines her observation to PRIME, who assumes an attitude of extreme innocence and detachment.

Have you found the way?

MRS. JASPER.

I'm looking for it.

COVERLEY.

Trafford's packing—he'll catch the 1.20.

MRS. JASPER.

Hurry him then—precipitate him!

COVERLEY.

I will. But if I could only precipitate *you!*

MRS. JASPER.

You can do so by leaving me alone.

COVERLEY.

I'll come back. The 1.20!

Exit COVERLEY with all speed, saluting the other two, to the court.

MRS. WIGMORE, to Mrs. JASPER.

Do you happen to know the occasion of my daughter's incongruous absence?

MRS. JASPER.

A lecture from her uncle.

MRS. WIGMORE, blank.

Hasn't she a mother to lecture her?

MRS. JASPER.

She's taking a course! (To PRIME.) I think we shall do best in the library.

PRIME.

Let *me* carry your things! (Springs forward, but is arrested by the instant interposition of Mrs. WIGMORE, who challenges him with a stony stare, so that he falls back abashed and even alarmed.)

MRS. WIGMORE, to Mrs. JASPER.

What are you doing with that young man?

MRS. JASPER.

Giving him a lesson in sketching.

MRS. WIGMORE.

And what is your pretext for so extraordinary a proceeding?

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

To keep him from running away!

Exit Mrs. JASPER to the library, while PRIME hurries after her, running the gauntlet of Mrs. WIGMORE's continued reprobation.

Re-enter Lady BRISKET from the stairs.

MRS. WIGMORE.

What is she doing with him?

LADY BRISKET, who has seen the others go out; reckless.

Making love to him!

MRS. WIGMORE, aghast.

And who's making love to Blandina?

LADY BRISKET, after an instant.

Nobody!

MRS. WIGMORE, with indignant energy.

I'll bring her back!

Exit Mrs. WIGMORE to the court.

LADY BRISKET, alone.

Our subservience was a false calculation—I've ceased to grovel! (Seeing TRAFFORD.) Oh, you impossible man!

Re-enter PERCY TRAFFORD from the Red Room, looking in cautiously first, then closing the door noiselessly behind him.

TRAFFORD.

I came in by the glass doors—Coverley's at my heels.

LADY BRISKET, vague.

What does he want of you?

TRAFFORD.

To take me to the station.

LADY BRISKET.

What concern is it of his?

TRAFFORD.

To please Mrs. Jasper.

LADY BRISKET.

What concern is it of hers?

TRAFFORD.

She disapproves of our friendship.

LADY BRISKET.

So she has done me the honour to tell me!

TRAFFORD.

She interferes too much!

LADY BRISKET.

Much too much! She has grabbed the Captain.

TRAFFORD, surprised.

Grabbed him?

LADY BRISKET, nodding at the library.

In there. She knows we favour his marriage.

TRAFFORD.

We do—for all the good it does us!

LADY BRISKET.

Little enough—so she needn't try to make it less.

TRAFFORD.

Dear lady, in what difficulties I leave you!

LADY BRISKET.

They may subside—Mrs. Jasper goes.

TRAFFORD, struck.

Goes! (With irrepressible curiosity.) By my train?

LADY BRISKET.

Which is your train?

TRAFFORD.

The next—the 1.20.

LADY BRISKET.

She has just set her maid to pack; she may catch it.

TRAFFORD, appreciative, inadvertent.

Oh, that'll be— (Then in a suddenly changed tone, with a feigned grimace, seeing that he has excited Lady BRISKET'S attention.) That'll be a horrid bore!

LADY BRISKET.

You'll not be under the least obligation to talk to her. (Producing her letter.) You can confine your attention to this.

TRAFFORD, with the letter.

What is it?

LADY BRISKET.

A few pages of farewell.

TRAFFORD, putting the letter with decision into his pocket.

I'll not read them.

LADY BRISKET, mistrustful.

You'll prefer then Mrs. Jasper's conversation?

TRAFFORD, with energy.

Never! I'll get into another carriage, and think only of the day you'll come up.

LADY BRISKET.

That day shall not dawn. When she has gone I shall feel less aggravated.

TRAFFORD.

Why *should* she go, if she's making up to Prime?

LADY BRISKET.

I shan't care, if she stays for that.

TRAFFORD.

Won't your husband care? (Then as Lady BRISKET seems struck.) That'll stir up Sir Montagu!

LADY BRISKET.

Perhaps that's why she does it!

TRAFFORD.

Then he'll keep her on.

LADY BRISKET, still more impressed.

If he keeps her on— (Hesitating.)

TRAFFORD, pressing, expectant.

You'll come up?

LADY BRISKET, after an instant.

I'll come up! (Then up at the window, alarmed.) Here's Flora! (Coming down.) Go *that* way! (Pushes him hurriedly to the door of the Red Room, thrusts him out and closes the door.)

Re-enter from the court, the moment she has done so, Mrs. WIGMORE and BLANDINA. Mrs. WIGMORE marches down to the right, followed submissively by BLANDINA, who wears her garden hat, and majestically opens the door of the library.

MRS. WIGMORE, commanding.

Go in there!

BLANDINA, as her mother gives her a smart push.

Yes, mamma.

Exit BLANDINA to the library.

MRS. WIGMORE, triumphantly facing about.

There!

LADY BRISKET.

You may be interested to know that Mr. Trafford has taken leave of us; he's starting for Copenhagen.

MRS. WIGMORE.

In charge of whom?

LADY BRISKET, seeing COVERLEY.

Of Mr. Coverley.

Re-enter CHARLES COVERLEY from the court.

COVERLEY, still breathless, coming down to Lady BRISKET.

Have you seen Mrs. Jasper?

LADY BRISKET.

She's leaving the house.

Exit Lady BRISKET to the stairs.

MRS. WIGMORE.

She hasn't left it yet. (Indicating the library.) She's in there.

COVERLEY, anxious.

Is she going?

MRS. WIGMORE.

She *has* to! (Then with exultation, as Mrs. JASPER reappears.) See? (Re-enter Mrs. JASPER from the library. Derisive.) May I inquire how the sketching comes on?

MRS. JASPER, gay.

Beautifully. He's copying hard.

MRS. WIGMORE, disconcerted.

Copying?

MRS. JASPER.

A little thing of mine.

MRS. WIGMORE, blank.

And what's Blandina doing?

MRS. JASPER, laughing.

Go and see!

Exit Mrs. WIGMORE quickly to the library.

COVERLEY.

You don't mean to say you're going?

MRS. JASPER.

Yes, Mr. Coverley, I'm going.

COVERLEY.

Then have you found the way?

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

Patience!

COVERLEY.

Preach that to Prime! You surely won't go till you've thrown him a rope.

MRS. JASPER.

Ropes are tangled things, and unfortunately my hour has struck.

COVERLEY.

Ah, but you must save him first!

MRS. JASPER, thoughtful, conceding.

Yes, I must save him first. (After an instant.) You see it's awfully hard.

COVERLEY.

That's just why I asked you. If it wasn't I could do it myself!

MRS. JASPER, still thoughtful.

I daresay it will come to me.

COVERLEY, urgent.

And you'll wait till it does come?

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

I'll wait! (In a different tone, with movement.) But don't *you* wait. You've to catch the 1.20.

COVERLEY.

With Trafford, yes. But he has given me the slip.

MRS. JASPER, impatient.

Look for him, then.

COVERLEY, vague, helpless.

I *am* looking!

MRS. JASPER, waving him off.

Don't look here; look somewhere else. (Then as COVERLEY reaches the door.) Don't stop half-way!

COVERLEY, at the door to the court; imperative.

Don't *you!*

Exit COVERLEY.

MRS. JASPER, alone.

How *can* I? (As PRIME reappears.) He has recovered flesh!

Re-enter Captain PRIME from the library, with a sketching-block covered with a water-colour drawing.

PRIME, at the right, smiling at Mrs. JASPER and holding the drawing, rather shyly and awkwardly, with its face against his breast.

I came to show you my copy.

MRS. JASPER, with concern.

Ah, don't smudge it! (Meeting him and taking the drawing from him.) Why, it's charming!

PRIME.

It's consoling.

MRS. JASPER, looking at his work with her head inclined.

You've a serious talent.

PRIME.

It *is* a refuge!

MRS. JASPER.

You see there's room for two.

PRIME.

I don't incommode you?

MRS. JASPER.

I can turn round! The sky only wants a little lighting up.

PRIME, eager, taking back his drawing.

I'll light it up.

Exit PRIME to the library.

MRS. JASPER, alone.

What a gift!

Re-enter Sir MONTAGU from the court.

SIR MONTAGU.

I purchased the right to see you again by taking Blandina out.

MRS. JASPER.

Then I suppose I may take advantage of it to tell you that Mr. Trafford's fairly off. Mr. Coverley's dragging him.

SIR MONTAGU.

And who's dragging Mr. Coverley? (As she hesitates, embarrassed for an answer.) You see it isn't so simple. What has become of Amy?

MRS. JASPER, seeing Lady BRISKET.

Here she is—leave us.

Re-enter Lady BRISKET from the stairs.

SIR MONTAGU, to his wife.

I'm trying to induce Mrs. Jasper to reconsider her departure. Please add your voice.

Exit Sir MONTAGU by the vestibule.

MRS. JASPER.

Don't take that trouble. Any extension I may be guilty of shall be studiously short.

LADY BRISKET.

You really mustn't speak as if I were turning you out of the house! I came back here to tell you that I'm sorry I forgot myself.

MRS. JASPER, gay, good-humoured.

We mustn't be sorry for anything whatever; we must only rejoice.

LADY BRISKET, cold.

I confess I don't see what there is to rejoice at!

MRS. JASPER.

Why, everything is turning out so well! (Disconcerted, as Lady BRISKET has stared, puzzled and suspicious, and she herself sees TRAFFORD at the door of the Red Room; then to herself.) Ah, no, it isn't; here he is again! (Re-enter TRAFFORD from the Red Room. Severely.) Mr. Trafford, Mr. Coverley's looking for you.

TRAFFORD.

I've been in and out that way (indicating the Red Room) looking for Mr. Coverley.

LADY BRISKET, seeing COVERLEY.

Here he is!

Re-enter CHARLES COVERLEY from the court.

MRS. JASPER, privately to COVERLEY.

Now seize him!

TRAFFORD, having eluded COVERLEY's attempt; to Mrs. JASPER.

I only looked in to see if I'm not to have the pleasure of your company.

MRS. JASPER.

Thank you—I'm waiting over.

COVERLEY, to Mrs. JASPER, anxious.

It hasn't come to you?

MRS. JASPER.

Be careful! (Goes up with him, quieting him, while TRAFFORD hurries to Lady BRISKET.)

TRAFFORD.

That's what I came back to hear.

LADY BRISKET.

It's for Montagu!

TRAFFORD.

It's for Montagu. So you'll come up?

LADY BRISKET, with resolution.

I'll come up.

Exit Lady BRISKET to the stairs.

MRS. JASPER, coming down.

To Copenhagen, Mr. Trafford!

TRAFFORD.

To Copenhagen!

COVERLEY, with enthusiasm, seizing TRAFFORD by the arm.

To Copenhagen!

Exeunt COVERLEY and TRAFFORD arm in arm to the court.

Re-enter Captain PRIME from the library.

PRIME, with his copy.

Is that a little better?

MRS. JASPER, taking it.

Ever so much—you're making strides.

PRIME.

You're a wonderful teacher.

MRS. JASPER.

You're a delightful pupil.

PRIME, taking back his drawing.

May I have another lesson to-morrow?

MRS. JASPER.

Here, do you mean?

PRIME.

I must come here, you know : I'm engaged.

MRS. JASPER.

Oh, yes ; I forgot you're engaged !

PRIME.

So did I, but I am !

MRS. JASPER, thoughtful before she commits herself.

Oh, yes, you are !

PRIME, abruptly, after a moment during which he has gazed at her fondly.

Mrs. Jasper, I should come back even if I wasn't !

MRS. JASPER, smiling.

For more instruction ?

PRIME.

I should like to learn *all* you can teach me.

MRS. JASPER.

You exaggerate my acquirements.

PRIME.

It's not only your acquirements ; it's your natural gifts !

MRS. JASPER.

Your extravagant faith in me makes me feel rather a humbug.

PRIME, pleading.

Ah, don't be *that*—be straight with me !

MRS. JASPER, to herself, enthusiastic.

He *is* a lamb!

PRIME, sadly shaking his head.

There's no glory in trying things on me: it's too easy!

MRS. JASPER.

You're candid, you're generous.

PRIME, with touching simplicity.

I take people at their word.

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

You're splendidly simple.

PRIME, attenuating with another sad headshake.

Oh, "splendidly!"

MRS. JASPER.

That's the sort of nature I like.

PRIME.

I'm certainly not brilliant, and *I* like brilliancy.

MRS. JASPER, after another instant.

You'll find it in Miss Wigmore.

PRIME, abrupt.

Mrs. Jasper, I don't require Miss Wigmore.

MRS. JASPER, laughing.

You speak as if she were a doctor—or a cab!

PRIME.

May I be very frank with you?

MRS. JASPER.

Surely, when in half-an-hour we've become such friends.

PRIME.

The best half-hour of my life. Misfortune draws people together.

MRS. JASPER, smiling.

I'm not conscious of misfortune!

PRIME.

Heaven forgive me, *I* am! (Seizing her arm.) Hush!

MRS. JASPER.

What's the matter?

PRIME, looking toward the library.

Are they coming?

MRS. JASPER, as he listens nearer the door.

I think not.

PRIME, coming back.

I think not. Mrs. Jasper, I don't want Miss Wigmore. (Intensely confidential.) I don't love Miss Wigmore.

MRS. JASPER, demurring.

Not just a little?

PRIME, making a clean breast of it.

Mrs. Jasper, I hate Miss Wigmore!

MRS. JASPER.

Then how do you come to be engaged to her?

PRIME.

Why, she said she'd marry me.

MRS. JASPER.

But you asked her, at least!

PRIME.

Oh, yes—they told me I *had* to.

MRS. JASPER.

Who told you?

PRIME.

Two men of the world—Coverley and Trafford.

MRS. JASPER.

Coverley and Trafford are busy-bodies!

PRIME.

Then I needn't, I mustn't? (Grasping her arm once more.) Must I, Mrs. Jasper—*must* I?

MRS. JASPER.

Do you mean if there's any way out of it?

PRIME.

Is there? Can you discover one?

MRS. JASPER.

I'll try, if you like.

PRIME.

You restore me to life. Let me try *with* you!

MRS. JASPER.

You must give me time!

PRIME.

Do you mean till to-morrow?

MRS. JASPER.

To-morrow's too soon—I mean it's too late!

PRIME, frightened.

Too late?

MRS. JASPER, confused, agitated.

I don't know *what* I mean!

PRIME.

It will be all right if we try together.

MRS. JASPER.

We mustn't try together—we must try apart! So now you must leave me.

PRIME, reluctant.

Give you up?

MRS. JASPER.

Leave the house—leave me to think!

PRIME.

Think—think hard. But let me come back for my lesson.

MRS. JASPER.

To-morrow? The difficulty is that I'm (after an instant) going away.

PRIME, aghast.

And giving me up?

MRS. JASPER, embarrassed.

I must give you up some time!

PRIME.

Grant me a day, at least!

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

Well—a day! (Then with a smile, giving him her hand.) But only for your lesson!

PRIME, holding her hand.

You've made me want doubly to be free! (As she quickly withdraws her hand, turning away from him.) Because now I know what I should do with my freedom!

MRS. JASPER, going up and round.

Go, go—I want to be alone!

PRIME, taking up his hat and gloves.

I shall come early to-morrow.

MRS. JASPER.

But you must say good-bye to Miss Wigmore.

PRIME, disconcerted.

Must I do that?

MRS. JASPER.

Oh, yes, you must do that! (PRIME smites his forehead in the same way as when dashing into the house at the end of Act First. Exit PRIME to the library.) He's not a child—he's a man! I admire him; I like him; I—a-ah! (Checks herself with an ejaculation which is half a burst of mirth, half a gasp of dismay, and, sinking into the nearest chair, covers her face with her hands.)

Re-enter CHARLES COVERLEY from the court.

COVERLEY, in suspense.

Has it arrived?

MRS. JASPER, startled, jumping up.

It's on its way! You didn't go with Mr. Trafford?

COVERLEY.

I put him in the fly.

MRS. JASPER.

Then I don't want you any more.

COVERLEY.

Just when I want *you* most?

MRS. JASPER, nervous, irritated, moving away from him.

What do you want of me?

COVERLEY.

To thank you for all you're doing for me.

MRS. JASPER.

Don't thank me yet!

COVERLEY.

I see—you're in the fever of invention.

MRS. JASPER.

I'm in the fever of invention.

COVERLEY.

And where's the Captain?

MRS. JASPER, indicating the library.

In there—but he's coming back: you mustn't meet him.

COVERLEY.

Mustn't meet him?

MRS. JASPER.

He suffers so!

COVERLEY, rueful.

Oh, if he suffers so—!

MRS. JASPER.

He's going in a moment. (As the door of the library opens.) Here he comes—pass in there! (She pushes COVERLEY toward the Red Room, opens the door, thrusts him in and closes it; then turns to meet Captain PRIME, who has come out of the library.)

PRIME, agitated, rebellious, distracted.

I can't keep it up, you know, Mrs. Jasper; I really can't!

MRS. JASPER.

You must, a few days—to gain time!

PRIME.

To lose it, you mean! Why go so far?

MRS. JASPER, her own emotion increasing.

Why indeed did you? You've gone too far!

PRIME.

That's just what I feel!

MRS. JASPER.

Too far to retreat, I mean. Therefore you must advance!

PRIME, pleading.

To my destruction?

MRS. JASPER.

We'll avert your destruction! Trust to your star; something will turn up!

PRIME.

That's the difficulty—that *you're* my star! Something *has* turned up.

MRS. JASPER, ardently.

It has—it has: it will turn up again!

PRIME.

The more it turns up the less I can advance! How can I be "engaged" when I love another woman?

MRS. JASPER, startled and embarrassed by this new complication.

Do you love another woman?

PRIME, breaking out.

Mrs. Jasper—I love *you!*

MRS. JASPER, with alarm.

Don't utter it! (Waving him away.) Go—fly!

PRIME, following her as she flies before him.

Mrs. Jasper, I adore you!

MRS. JASPER, holding him in check.

You *can't*—not *yet!*

PRIME.

When *can* I then? Tell me when!

MRS. JASPER.

I must look about me—I must see!

PRIME.

You'll tell me to-morrow?

MRS. JASPER.

To-morrow.

PRIME.

You won't put me off?

MRS. JASPER, at the end of her patience, driving him up to the left.

Not if you'll go!

PRIME, resisting.

Do you like me?

MRS. JASPER, to get him off.

I like you!

PRIME, holding his ground.

Would you marry me?

MRS. JASPER, continuing to push him off.

I'll tell you to-morrow!

PRIME.

Early?

MRS. JASPER.

About this time!

PRIME.

Noon? (At the door to the vestibule, with exultation, possessing himself of her hand.) Angel!

MRS. JASPER, laughing in spite of her dread of COVERLEY'S return, snatching back her hand, which he has managed to carry to his lips, and finally getting rid of him.

Lamb!

ACT THIRD

MRS. JASPER'S drawing-room; modest and elegant. Entrance at the centre from the hall and staircase; entrance at the right from another room.

Mrs. JASPER seated, lost in thought, on a small Louis Quinze sofa; which, with a table beside it of the same period, are down at the left. A book is in her lap, which she has begun to cut, but is not reading. Enter the PARLOUR-MAID from the hall.

PARLOUR-MAID.

A telegram, ma'am.

MRS. JASPER, who has taken the telegram, opened it and glanced at it; with a gesture of impatience and disappointment.

Sir Montagu! No answer. (Exit the PARLOUR-MAID. Mrs. JASPER rises, reads aloud.) "In town to-day; will come to lunch." (Thinking; then with decision.) I'll lunch out!

Re-enter the PARLOUR-MAID.

PARLOUR-MAID.

Captain Prime!

MRS. JASPER, struck.

No, I won't: I'll lunch at home!

Enter Captain PRIME from the hall. Exit the PARLOUR-MAID.

PRIME, as Mrs. JASPER lets him, with extreme devotion, take and keep her hand.

You told me at Brisket you were coming home for courage. (Anxiously.) I hope you've found it.

MRS. JASPER.

I've hunted it up and down London. I'm resting a moment.

PRIME.

I'm not; they're too close behind me!

MRS. JASPER, startled.

They're coming *here?*

PRIME.

Not yet; we've time.

MRS. JASPER.

That's all I want—time!

PRIME.

We've only an hour; they'll arrive. They've fixed the day.

MRS. JASPER, alarmed.

To-morrow?

PRIME.

The twenty-fifth. There I am!

MRS. JASPER.

I see; you had to consent.

PRIME.

I had to consent, but I also had to fly.

MRS. JASPER.

When did you come away?

PRIME.

This morning, at the peep of dawn. (Then nervous, pleading; with a sudden fear.) You won't give me back to them—you won't?

MRS. JASPER, smiling.

Not without a struggle. But mercy on us, how far we've come!

PRIME.

For the time it has taken, yes. But we surely can't stop where we are.

MRS. JASPER.

Dear Captain Prime, where *are* we, you know? That's what I ask myself.

PRIME.

Well, I don't care where, so long as we're together.

MRS. JASPER.

If we advance together it must be step by step, and armed to the teeth. Remember that we're in the enemy's country.

PRIME.

That was the case at Brisket; it's not the case here.

MRS. JASPER.

Here we shall have the enemy in ours; it comes to the same thing. (After an instant.) There's a difference, however; for now I've a better conscience.

PRIME.

Mine was perfect from the first!

MRS. JASPER.

Oh, mine required clearing up: I've been busy setting it in order! Our pace on that wonderful occasion was so rapid; it made the situation so false. It was as if I had dreamed a dream or drunk a potion. I had to recover my reason; I had to return to reality. (Giving him her hand again.) I think this *is* reality.

PRIME, rueful.

I think so too, Mrs. Jasper, with my position so much worse.

MRS. JASPER.

Ah no, not worse. Essentially better!

PRIME.

How in the world is it better, dearest, since we've been able to *do* nothing?

MRS. JASPER.

We've been able to do everything. We've learned to know each other, to be sure of ourselves. It was that second day at Brisket, before my own flight, that made us sure. It signed and sealed the treaty.

PRIME.

Well then, if the treaty's signed and sealed we can act on it.

MRS. JASPER, after an instant, dubious.

Act on it—yes.

PRIME.

I mean we can take the shortest cut.

MRS. JASPER.

What do you call the shortest cut?

PRIME.

Why, simply announce that we're engaged!

MRS. JASPER.

Dear Captain Prime, wouldn't that make you guilty of a sort of sketchy bigamy? Before we simply announce that we're engaged (after a pause) we must simply become so!

PRIME.

That only depends on you—this very instant.

MRS. JASPER.

This very instant is premature.

PRIME.

Why so, if we're sure of ourselves?

MRS. JASPER.

We must be sure of some other people!

PRIME.

You told me at Brisket that you wanted to "save" me. The only way to save me is to lead me to a different altar.

MRS. JASPER.

I must find a different one for Blandina! (After another short, intense reverie.) Perhaps it might be possible to make Mr. Coverley take her. (Then catching herself up, discouraged.) Oh, I forgot—he's in love with *me!*

PRIME.

Yes, fancy the wretch!

MRS. JASPER.

You ought to be able to fancy him!

PRIME, good-humouredly, after an instant during which, in rejoinder to her last speech, he has playfully kissed her hand.

Oh, I'll forgive him everything; for without him where should we be?

MRS. JASPER.

He was what they call a blessing in disguise.

PRIME.

And so was that brute of a Trafford.

MRS. JASPER, with an idea, suddenly seizing his arm.

Make *him* take her! (Then relapsing in the same way as before.) Oh, I forgot, he's in love with me too!

PRIME, blank.

Is every one in love with you?

MRS. JASPER.

Yes, it makes every one, now that you are. I ought to let you know it.

PRIME.

Thank you. (After an instant.) Well, it can't be helped! I thought Mr. Trafford was in love with Lady Brisket.

MRS. JASPER.

He's differently affected; he's in love with every one.

PRIME.

With every one, alas! but Blandina.

MRS. JASPER.

He's capable even of that.

PRIME, eager.

Is he? Then there's an issue!

MRS. JASPER, struck.

It might be, if Amy didn't bar it.

PRIME.

Lady Brisket? (Then gravely, as if with apprehension.) She doesn't reciprocate his passion?

MRS. JASPER.

You're shocked, you dear; very properly. But it isn't shocking. Poor Amy's in love with no one but her husband, and only made foolish by his own folly. (Giving a specimen.) He's coming to lunch with me!

PRIME, surprised.

Is he in town?

MRS. JASPER.

Just arrived; he has wired. *He's* made foolish by his wife's folly.

PRIME, quick, with an inspiration.

So that if each could be got straight—?

MRS. JASPER, catching his idea.

Mr. Trafford would be sent about his business! (Plausible, convincing.) His business is to marry Blandina. (Then with immense decision.) We'll *get* them straight!

PRIME.

Then the thing is to catch Trafford.

MRS. JASPER, arrested, disconcerted.

Oh, I forgot—he has left the country!

PRIME.

We must bring him back.

MRS. JASPER, with a happy thought.

I'll send Mr. Coverley after him!

PRIME.

Without delay, then: every minute counts. Remember that I'm sinking into the sand.

MRS. JASPER, with elation.

I don't care for the sand—I'm the Sphinx!

PRIME.

Ah, but I'm not one of the Pyramids!

MRS. JASPER.

No, indeed, you're a pilgrim in the desert; you're a breathing, struggling man. Therefore Sir Montagu mustn't find you here.

PRIME.

Why not? He knows you like me.

MRS. JASPER.

Then we've no occasion to remind him!

PRIME.

Appeal to him, on the contrary; tell him the simple facts.

MRS JASPER.

The less I tell him the better! (Going for PRIME's hat and stick, which he has put down on coming in.) I can manage him only if you go.

PRIME, regretful, reluctant, taking his things.

Where in the world *shall* I go?

MRS. JASPER.

Can't you run round to your club?

PRIME.

Dear lady, think of the Wigmores!

MRS. JASPER, thinking of them.

Would they enter the building?

PRIME.

Enter it? They'd occupy it! (Supplicating.) Let me remain at least on the premises.

MRS. JASPER.

While you're still Blandina's?

PRIME.

All the more reason! (Nodding toward the other room.) I'll stay in there.

MRS. JASPER.

It's my dear old "den"—it's full of my things.

PRIME.

They're just what I want to see!

MRS. JASPER, struck by a sound.

Hush, he's coming! (Waving him into the other room.) Then hide!

Exit PRIME rapidly to the other room. Re-enter the PARLOUR-MAID

PARLOUR-MAID.

Mr. Trafford.

Enter PERCY TRAFFORD from the hall. Exit the PARLOUR-MAID.

MRS JASPER, surprised, struck, relieved, recognising with a joy she can scarcely conceal, though she endeavours to hide it with an air of disapproval, the opportunity indicated in the preceding scene.

Oh, *you?*

TRAFFORD.

No, I've not got off; I anticipate your displeasure. (Then puzzled, mystified, as MRS. JASPER, with her eyes fixed on him, slowly and mysteriously circles round him as it were, in silence, while, not unwilling to

bewilder him, she asks herself how she had best proceed with him.) Are you too displeased to speak to me? (She still remains silent, retracing her steps and revolving in the opposite sense, so that at last quite bewildered he goes on with a droll suppliant uneasiness.) Are you trying to hypnotise me?

MRS. JASPER, stopping, but still with her eyes on him.

Pray, what has prevented your getting off?

TRAFFORD, breaking out, to conciliate her.

The desire to see *you* once more!

MRS. JASPER.

How did you know I was in town?

TRAFFORD.

I just came on the chance—to ask.

MRS. JASPER.

At this extraordinary hour?

TRAFFORD.

It's the eve of my departure and the fault of my impatience. I feel already an exile.

MRS. JASPER, visibly debating within herself an instant; then, as if in consequence of the definite determination to assume with him a certain attitude and take a certain line, after she has seated herself again on her sofa with her book and her paper-cutter.

So that you've come to me for consolation?

TRAFFORD, reassured, led on by her tone.

You've said it, Mrs. Jasper. Be kind to me this once.

MRS. JASPER, considering, while she cuts her book, then raising her eyes to him with strange expressiveness.

Well, this once. (Still looking at him in the same way, while she points to a seat.) Sit down.

TRAFFORD, who has eagerly seated himself.

My motive for a step of this boldness has been the wish not to start without bidding you good-bye.

MRS. JASPER, smiling.

Good-bye is soon said, Mr. Trafford, when it has to be! I tried to say it with all possible distinctness at Brisket.

TRAFFORD, smiling as she smiles, and drawing his seat a little nearer.

So did I, Mrs. Jasper, but I couldn't utter the sound! I felt therefore to-day the yearning to address you a last word.

MRS. JASPER, very busy with the leaves of her book.

You prolong the agony, don't you see, Mr. Trafford?

TRAFFORD, insinuating.

I prolong the agony, as you justly remark, Mrs. Jasper; but I also shorten a little—don't *you* see?—the separation!

MRS. JASPER.

Our separation is surely too fundamental to be affected by a visit, on your part, the more or the less. Don't you remember that I was obliged to tell you at Brisket there never would be anything in the nature of a chance for you?

TRAFFORD, arguing with increased confidence.

Yes, but your manner just now seemed to promise—it seems to promise, Mrs. Jasper, even while I speak!—a certain relaxation of your rigour; and since you refer to what passed between us at Brisket, I may remind you, on *my* side, that I expressed to you there how deeply I long for sympathy.

MRS. JASPER.

You seemed to me not to long for it in vain!

TRAFFORD.

So I ventured to believe at moments, and yet I have asked myself, these last days, what has happened to deprive me, in the connection to which you so indulgently allude, of any further symbol of it.

MRS. JASPER, to herself.

He takes us in rotation! (Then looking at him a moment.) Do I correctly infer that you have come to me for news of Lady Brisket?

TRAFFORD, smiling, slightly embarrassed.

I've said enough to show you that that was not *all* my errand! But if you have any news of Lady Brisket to communicate, I won't deny that I shall be properly grateful for it.

MRS. JASPER.

I left her at Brisket, from which she gave no indication at all of an intention to stir.

TRAFFORD, betraying inadvertently a slight surprise.

No symptom at all?

MRS. JASPER, struck; then ironical.

Have you been expecting her to travel up and pay you a visit?

TRAFFORD.

I've been simply hoping that I might, before I go, have a last word from her.

MRS. JASPER.

You're very fond of last words! This miracle of her silence, then, you've come to *me* to explain?

TRAFFORD, alarmed by her tone and extenuating.

I was restless, I was disappointed—

MRS. JASPER, interrupting him, insisting on her advantage and following it up.

And you thought *I* might amuse you—in the absence of anything better? (Closing her book and rising sharply.) I seemed a woman you might come to—to talk of another woman?

TRAFFORD, springing up, startled, mystified; then, after staring a moment, falling into the trap and almost plaintively explaining.

Dear Mrs. Jasper, there are so few subjects that your great severity allows! Only let me feel that I'm at liberty, and there's one on which I shall be eloquent enough!

MRS. JASPER, after an instant, more gently.

Don't be eloquent, Mr. Trafford. Leave the country in silence.

TRAFFORD, ardent.

I can't leave it till I've explained my position.

MRS. JASPER.

If you explain it you'll spoil it. It's so fine as it is!

TRAFFORD, infatuated, beguiled.

You mean my conscientious retreat—to spare Lady Brisket any shadow of annoyance? Let me prove to you its reality by telling you that I've made my arrangements to leave England (after an hesitation; bringing it out) to-day.

MRS. JASPER, as if suppressing a shock.

To-day?

TRAFFORD.

I take the club-train. But, Mrs. Jasper—

MRS. JASPER, as if waiting in averted suspense, while he nervously hangs fire.

Yes, Mr. Trafford?

TRAFFORD.

I take the club-train because I gave my word, at Brisket, not to linger too long. But my leave of absence isn't really at an end, and though prompt departure has been prescribed to me in an amiable quarter, I should be delighted to make a later start if it should be even so much as hinted at in another!

MRS. JASPER, after an instant, facing round to him with a kindled countenance and a complete change of manner.

Your assurance, Mr. Trafford, ought to carry you very far in your profession! (As, taken aback by her unexpectedness, he

makes a vague gesture of protest.) You produce in that unhappy house as pretty a domestic muddle as one could wish to see, and then, at the very moment you've a chance to retrieve it by an act of common decorum, you throw yourself with all your levity into a declaration which is neither more nor less than an impertinence to two women at once!

TRAFFORD, staggered a little, but recovering himself.

Can I help it if the charm you exercise— ?

MRS. JASPER, breaking in.

Is it too much to hope that the charm I exercise may make you ashamed of yourself?

TRAFFORD, after a bewildered silence.

I'll take the club-train.

MRS. JASPER, abrupt, imperative.

You'll do nothing of the sort!

TRAFFORD, blank.

What then *am* I to wait for?

MRS. JASPER.

Your punishment!

TRAFFORD, rueful.

Dear lady, I feel as if I had had it!

MRS. JASPER.

You'll feel so still more before I've done with you!

TRAFFORD.

Will you be so good as to tell me what it's to consist of?

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

I should like first to know the hour.

TRAFFORD, looking at his watch.

It's getting on to one.

MRS. JASPER, arranging the bosom of her dress.

Then I haven't time—I'm expecting Sir Montagu.

TRAFFORD, startled.

Is he in town?

MRS. JASPER.

He has just come up—to see if you've gone.

TRAFFORD, putting on his gloves and still more uneasy.

If I haven't then, it will be your fault!

MRS. JASPER.

I'll take the responsibility, for I have the satisfaction! But he mustn't find you yet.

TRAFFORD, alert, but not exactly in a panic, inasmuch as he must, so far as possible, indicate that if he wishes to avoid Sir MONTAGU it is not so much for the sake of his own skin as because he owes it to Lady BRISKET.

Good-bye, then.

MRS. JASPER, listening, catching his arm.

Wait—a ring at the door!

TRAFFORD, listening.

Is it he?

MRS. JASPER.

I daresay!

TRAFFORD, anxious.

Which way shall I go?

MRS. JASPER, with vivacity, as, to take a different door from the one he has come in by, he goes up to the centre.

Not there!

Re-enter the PARLOUR-MAID.

PARLOUR-MAID.

Mr. Coverley!

Enter CHARLES COVERLEY from the hall. Exit the PARLOUR-MAID.

MRS. JASPER.

You arrive in the nick of time—I commit Mr. Trafford to your keeping.

COVERLEY, astonished at finding TRAFFORD.

Again?

MRS. JASPER.

Please shut him up till he's wanted.

TRAFFORD, seizing his chance to get off.

Coverley will know where to find me!

Exit TRAFFORD briskly to the hall.

MRS. JASPER, anxious.

Shall you know where to find him?

COVERLEY.

He has always the same hotel. But I thought he had gone.

MRS. JASPER.

So did I! (Then pressing COVERLEY.) Don't lose him—follow him!

COVERLEY, evading her and coming round, vague, on the other side.

To see him off?

MRS. JASPER.

To keep him on! (With extreme urgency.) Do look out, or he'll go.

COVERLEY, bewildered.

I thought that was what you clamoured for.

MRS. JASPER.

I did, but I've changed. At present you must help.

COVERLEY.

That's exactly what I've come for. I returned to town as soon as I knew you had left Brisket.

MRS. JASPER.

Make yourself useful then; secure Mr. Trafford.

COVERLEY, uneasy, refusing to be hustled off.

I want to secure *you!* I want, moreover, an account of your proceedings.

MRS. JASPER, with affected blankness.

What proceedings?

COVERLEY.

The Captain is still in his chains. An hour after I first appealed to you, you told me you had found a way to get him off. I was delighted with your promptitude, and that evening I asked you what the way might be. You requested me to wait and see.

MRS. JASPER.

Well, wait a little longer.

COVERLEY.

I've already waited an eternity.

MRS. JASPER.

Wait till to-morrow.

COVERLEY.

That's what you said at Brisket.

MRS. JASPER.

Wait till to-night.

COVERLEY.

Why the deuce is it such a mystery?

MRS. JASPER.

It's difficult; it's delicate; it's complicated.

COVERLEY.

Upon my honour, it *must* be! Incantations and mystic spells!

MRS. JASPER.

I know what I'm about. When I consented to oblige you, I made it clear to you that you must give me a free hand; you must trust me. If you don't trust me it's all over.

COVERLEY, yielding, throwing up his objections.

How can I help trusting you when I adore you?

MRS. JASPER.

Adore me a little less, and trust me a little more.

COVERLEY.

Ah, but it isn't only me. It's the victim of my wretched rashness. Can the Captain trust you?

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

I think he does. (Then after another instant.) I'll tell you my idea. (Laying her hand on his arm and, while he waits, hopeful, looking at him.) It's to give her to your accomplice. Make Trafford take her.

COVERLEY, astonished.

Blandina? *Will* Trafford take her?

MRS. JASPER.

He'll simply have to!

COVERLEY.

Why will he have to?

MRS. JASPER.

That's my secret.

COVERLEY.

How can I "help" if I don't know it?

MRS. JASPER.

By not letting him escape.

COVERLEY, alert, seizing his hat.

I'll bring him back.

MRS. JASPER, with her hand on his arm.

Wait a moment! (Then after an instant during which, in her mind, she visibly and anxiously tries to harmonise her difficulties.) What time is it now?

COVERLEY, looking at his watch.

It's one.

MRS. JASPER.

Then bring him at two.

COVERLEY, with eager assent, going inadvertently, in his headlong haste, up to centre.

At two!

MRS. JASPER.

Not there! (Explaining.) My den.

COVERLEY, at the door to the hall.

I wish I were Daniel!

Exit COVERLEY.

Re-enter PRIME from the other room.

PRIME.

Has he gone?

MRS. JASPER.

It wasn't Sir Montagu. But take care!

PRIME.

That room there is like a fortress. My gratitude overflows.

MRS. JASPER.

It can overflow later.

PRIME.

I must live in the moment. To be there among your possessions—your books, your sketches, your flowers—gives me a sense of strength.

MRS. JASPER, fortified also an instant and rejoicing without reserve.

In a word you feel at home!

PRIME.

As I've never felt anywhere. Yet at the same time, do you know? I've a wild desire to go off with you.

MRS. JASPER.

Why should we go off?

PRIME.

To break with everything; to insist on our freedom.

MRS. JASPER, after an instant.

Dear Captain Prime, you showed, on a momentous occasion, a delicacy the vision of which won my heart. We must keep at that beautiful height; we mustn't fall below it.

PRIME.

There would be nothing so delicate or so beautiful as to forget all these people *with* you. And we should come back in the fulness of time only the more united.

MRS. JASPER.

You must *wait* for the fulness of time. Otherwise you'll be terribly judged.

PRIME.

Oh, I don't care how I'm judged!

Re-enter, without their perceiving it, the PARLOUR-MAID.

MRS. JASPER.

Do you care how *I* am?

Enter Sir MONTAGU BRISKET from the hall.

PRIME, passionate.

You? You're an angel!

PARLOUR-MAID.

Sir Montagu Brisket.

Exit the PARLOUR-MAID.

SIR MONTAGU, as Mrs. JASPER and PRIME precipitately separate.

I appear to have interrupted a scene of considerable intimacy!

MRS JASPER, at the right to PRIME at the left.

We must accept the interruption, Captain Prime.

PRIME.

Does that mean that I must leave you?

MRS. JASPER.

If you'll be so very good.

PRIME, who is without his hat and stick, which he has taken out with him on his former exit, passes up to the centre. Sir MONTAGU comes down to the left. PRIME pauses, looks at him an instant, without defiance but with visible deliberation, and then goes into the other room.

SIR MONTAGU, surprised.

Where is he gone?

MRS. JASPER.

To my boudoir.

SIR MONTAGU.

Do you give him the run of your house?

MRS. JASPER.

He comes to call.

SIR MONTAGU.

What does Blandina say to that?

MRS. JASPER.

It's a question you must put to Blandina.

SIR MONTAGU, after an instant.

Shall I tell her he thinks you an angel?

MRS. JASPER.

She'll not be surprised, for she knows you do.

SIR MONTAGU, nettled.

An angel, dear lady, with somewhat drooping wings! Did you get my telegram?

MRS. JASPER.

It made me deplore your precipitation.

SIR MONTAGU.

My reception is even more frigid than I feared.

MRS. JASPER.

Your wife will take an unfortunate view of a visit to London which so quickly follows my return.

SIR MONTAGU.

My conscience is clear about my visit to London. I came up to make sure that fellow has gone.

MRS. JASPER.

Mr. Trafford? (After an instant.) Why should you suppose *I* can inform you?

SIR MONTAGU.

I take you by the way; I ask you to feed my hunger.

MRS. JASPER.

Will that be fair to Amy?

SIR MONTAGU.

Does she want even to starve me?

MRS. JASPER.

You know my attitude; I've made it plain. I wish to be without reproach.

SIR MONTAGU, after an instant, with attention.

And without observers?

MRS. JASPER.

I don't understand.

SIR MONTAGU.

Let me be sure then that *I* do. You won't give me luncheon?

MRS. JASPER.

No, Sir Montagu, it's impossible.

SIR MONTAGU, after looking into his hat a moment.

You say you wish to be without reproach. Excuse me if I reply that you take a singular way to become so. (As she makes a movement of impatience and indifference.) Has anything occurred to free Captain Prime from his pledge to my niece?

MRS. JASPER.

Nothing.

SIR MONTAGU.

Then you must permit me to observe that his proper place is not in your boudoir.

MRS. JASPER.

He must judge for himself of his proper place.

SIR MONTAGU.

May I inquire if *he's* to remain to luncheon?

MRS. JASPER.

I daresay he will if I invite him.

SIR MONTAGU.

If you wish to be fair to Amy, why be grossly the opposite to Blandina?

MRS. JASPER.

You'll see that I shall not be.

SIR MONTAGU, after an instant.

You mean you'll let her have her lover on condition that you don't lose your own?

MRS. JASPER, starting, wounded, indignant, her hand on her heart.

Ah, Sir Montagu—!

SIR MONTAGU, supremely satiric, at the door to the hall.

I'll acquaint her with your extraordinary terms!

Exit Sir MONTAGU.

MRS. JASPER, alone with her emotion.

It's to *that* I expose myself? Ah, it's too hard! (Sinks into a chair and, overwhelmed, upset, bursts into tears. The bang of the house-door, downstairs, is heard.)

Re-enter Captain PRIME from the other room.

PRIME.

He has gone; I hear him. (Then following Mrs. JASPER, who at his entrance has very quickly sprung up and moved away from him; his sus-

picions aroused by his first glance at her.) But what on earth did he say to you?

MRS. JASPER, who has quickly brushed away her agitation, disguising it with her bravery.

It doesn't signify what he said.

PRIME.

It signifies to me when people insult you!

MRS. JASPER.

You're not in a position to defend me.

PRIME.

Not in a position, when I worship you?

MRS. JASPER.

To worship me now is to dishonour me.

PRIME, discouraged.

Heavens—you too?

MRS. JASPER.

I think perhaps it's I who dishonour *you*. I expose you more than I guard you.

PRIME, in despair.

You do turn me away then?

MRS. JASPER.

I must—till we're free.

PRIME.

For people to come and outrage you?

MRS. JASPER.

They won't if we're separate.

PRIME, struck.

Ah, how I make you suffer!

MRS. JASPER.

I'm willing to suffer—for *you*. If I wish you to go, it's for yourself.

PRIME.

To feel that I desert you, and leave you all the burden? I'll only go if you come *with* me!

MRS. JASPER, discouraged, faltering an instant.

Give me up rather; I'm not worth your trouble. Go off and escape: a man can! Take wings and forget us all.

PRIME.

No, I have my answer to your visitors. This is the very place for me to give it.

MRS. JASPER.

You shall never give your answer before I've given mine!

PRIME.

Then you'll have to be quick.

Re-enter the PARLOUR-MAID.

PARLOUR-MAID.

Lady Brisket.

MRS. JASPER, startled; then, with confidence.

I *shall* be quick! (Enter Lady BRISKET from the hall. Exit the PARLOUR-MAID. To Lady BRISKET.) I'm the more surprised to see you as Sir Montagu didn't mention that you had come up with him.

LADY BRISKET, who has stopped short, astonished, between them, looking from PRIME to Mrs. JASPER.

Has he been here then?

MRS. JASPER.

He has just left me. (Gay.) Perhaps you didn't come up with him?

LADY BRISKET.

He took the ten.

MRS. JASPER.

And you took the eleven?

LADY BRISKET, looking at PRIME.

The Wigmores were to take the twelve.

MRS. JASPER, to PRIME.

Be in the other room to receive them.

PRIME inclines himself gravely to both ladies and goes out again.

LADY BRISKET.

You're right in supposing they'll come here. They suspect you.

MRS. JASPER.

Every one suspects me, dear Amy. You yourself most of all.

LADY BRISKET.

Well, you've just admitted that Montagu has been here.

MRS. JASPER.

That was so little my fault that I allowed him to stay but five minutes.

LADY BRISKET, after an instant.

You sacrificed him to Captain Prime?

MRS. JASPER.

The sacrifice cost me nothing, for I saw that my own attractions had had little to do with his adventure. (After a moment.) His visit was for Mr. Trafford.

LADY BRISKET, sceptical, mocking.

Did he expect to find him *here?*

MRS. JASPER.

He missed him by only ten minutes.

LADY BRISKET.

Mr. Trafford's still in London?

MRS. JASPER.

Didn't you know it? (As Lady Brisket turns away in silence.) Let me express my regret that you've come up.

LADY BRISKET.

I came up to watch my husband.

MRS. JASPER.

Well, he came up to watch his wife.

LADY BRISKET.

How, since he left her at Brisket?

MRS. JASPER.

Believing that Mr. Trafford was still on the scene, he had his reasons for suspecting that she would presently arrive. You see that, finding a fortunate colour in Sir Montagu's own movements, she *has* arrived.

LADY BRISKET.

Mr. Trafford has had nothing to do with it.

MRS. JASPER, with a sad, discouraged shrug.

You and your husband watch each other too much!

LADY BRISKET, after a moment.

Then Montagu doesn't know—

MRS. JASPER.

That Mr. Trafford hasn't gone? No, I didn't betray to him that very objectionable fact. But I think it right that you should be informed—

LADY BRISKET, as Mrs. JASPER hesitates.

Of what?

MRS. JASPER.

That Mr. Trafford came here to make love to me.

LADY BRISKET, blank.

To *you?*

MRS. JASPER.

Not for the first time!

LADY BRISKET.

Are you telling me the real truth?

MRS. JASPER.

Yes, and only a fraction of that.

LADY BRISKET, after a moment; with irritation.

When *does* Mr. Trafford go?

MRS. JASPER, smiling.

Whenever I like!

LADY BRISKET, with growing resentment.

He's very obliging.

MRS. JASPER, gay.

To a degree that would surprise you!

LADY BRISKET.

I've more surprises than one. (After an instant.) What are you doing with Captain Prime?

MRS. JASPER.

Do you want very much to know?

LADY BRISKET, relenting, more confiding.

So much so that, to tell you the perfect truth, that has been the reason of my coming.

MRS. JASPER.

There surely was never anything in the world for which there were so many reasons!

LADY BRISKET.

When we learned at Brisket this morning that Captain Prime had vanished, it set us women thinking.

MRS. JASPER.

Let me help you women to think. (After an instant.) Captain Prime has confided to me his trouble.

LADY BRISKET, with an embarrassed, somewhat rigid contrition.

His trouble has been partly *my* fault.

MRS. JASPER.

A very happy fault for me!

LADY BRISKET, seizing Mrs. JASPER'S arm.

You care for him then?

MRS. JASPER, looking at her a moment fixedly; then, with a droll smile which is half a grimace of pain, looking down at her arm, which Lady BRISKET continues to clutch.

Do you know you have your nails in my flesh?

LADY BRISKET, withdrawing her hand and pleading.

Do care for him; *do*, to oblige me!

MRS. JASPER.

My dear child, I never cared for any one in my life!

LADY BRISKET, wondering, earnest.

Not even, really, for Montagu?

MRS. JASPER.

Some day he'll tell you how I've treated him.

LADY BRISKET.

I'll make him!

MRS. JASPER.

When he does, you'll find it hard to forgive me.

LADY BRISKET.

I'll forgive you if you'll marry Captain Prime!

MRS. JASPER.

You mean by that that you'll believe me. (After an instant.) Well, I want to be believed!

LADY BRISKET, intensely insistent.

Marry him! (Then with a kind of suppliant triumph over her fears, a joy in seeing the way to prove to herself that she is safe.) I'll *dance* at your wedding!

MRS. JASPER.

You forget, my dear, that he's engaged to Blandina.

LADY BRISKET, after a moment.

We'll break that off.

MRS. JASPER.

What then will become of Miss Wigmore?

LADY BRISKET, thinking an instant; then with an impatient gesture disposing of the question as if it is of very secondary importance.

She'll find another husband.

MRS. JASPER.

She must. But where will she find him?

LADY BRISKET, vague, perplexed, indifferent; casting about her with rapid motion.

I don't know; I'll think of one.

MRS. JASPER, urgent.

Think of him as hard as you can. While you're thinking I'll give an order for luncheon.

LADY BRISKET, pleased, reconciled.

Do you wish me to stay to it?

MRS. JASPER, at the door of the other room.

Rather, my dear! And to dinner!

Exit Mrs. JASPER.

LADY BRISKET, alone, at a loss.

Think of one, yes! But whom *can* I think of?

Re-enter the PARLOUR-MAID.

PARLOUR-MAID.

Mr. Coverley!

Re-enter COVERLEY. Exit the PARLOUR-MAID.

COVERLEY.

Have you seen Mrs. Jasper?

LADY BRISKET, struck, impatient.

Never mind Mrs. Jasper. Will you take Blandina?

COVERLEY, blank.

Take her where?

LADY BRISKET.

To your home; to your heart. Will you marry her?

COVERLEY, bewildered but decided.

No, Lady Brisket; I can't go so far as that.

LADY BRISKET, resentful.

It seems to me that in your position you ought to do something!

COVERLEY, plaintive.

Why, Lady Brisket, it seems to myself that I do everything. I've been rushing round again after Trafford.

LADY BRISKET, struck, curious.

After Trafford?

COVERLEY.

I've brought him back; he's downstairs.

LADY BRISKET, still more struck; quite feverish.

Then send him up to me.

COVERLEY.

I'll send him up to you. (At the door to the hall.) Alone?

LADY BRISKET, impressive.

Alone.

COVERLEY, compliant.

Alone.

Exit COVERLEY.

LADY BRISKET.

He has been making love to *her?* I'll give him someone to make love to!

Re-enter PERCY TRAFFORD from the hall.

TRAFFORD, bounding toward her with irrepressible assurance.

So you've come to me at last?

LADY BRISKET, distant, chilling.

You take too much for granted, Mr. Trafford. I've not come to *you!*

TRAFFORD, disconcerted.

It's the less to your credit, then, after your solemn promise.

LADY BRISKET.

My promise was made in ignorance of your extraordinary manner of understanding our friendship.

TRAFFORD.

I cease to understand it indeed when you address me in such a tone.

LADY BRISKET.

My tone is doubtless a contrast to that in which you address Mrs. Jasper!

TRAFFORD, affecting blankness.

Mrs. Jasper?

LADY BRISKET.

I know everything; she has told me all!

TRAFFORD, after an instant.

Mrs. Jasper misrepresents me.

LADY BRISKET.

One thing is very certain, that you don't make the faintest impression on her!

TRAFFORD, after another instant; irritated, with intention.

Ah, you told me at Brisket who does make an impression on her!

LADY BRISKET.

Well, it was all a mistake. He doesn't!

TRAFFORD.

You get over your mistakes with a rapidity—!

LADY BRISKET.

I've been cured of that delusion by the evidence. (Then after an instant.) Mrs. Jasper's in love with Captain Prime.

TRAFFORD, startled, scandalised.

With a person who's all but married?

LADY BRISKET, smiling and tranquil.

Don't be shocked! He's not married yet.

TRAFFORD.

Pray, who's to prevent it?

LADY BRISKET.

All of us together. It's out of the question.

TRAFFORD.

Have you forgotten that last week you were crazy about it?

LADY BRISKET.

Last week I was crazy about several things. I've recovered my reason.

TRAFFORD.

What then does that valuable organ suggest to you to do with Miss Wigmore?

LADY BRISKET, after an instant; with resolution.

To make *you* take her.

TRAFFORD, blank.

Take her where?

LADY BRISKET.

To Copenhagen, as your wife. It's your duty.

TRAFFORD, aghast.

My duty?

LADY BRISKET.

You sacrificed Captain Prime; you must save him.

TRAFFORD, indignant.

And did *you* do nothing? You put it into my head.

LADY BRISKET.

I did wrong. I'm bound to repair my fault.

TRAFFORD.

By sacrificing me?

LADY BRISKET.

No more than you've sacrificed me!

TRAFFORD, staring.

You? How?

LADY BRISKET.

On this spot, an hour ago. You're convicted. Besides, you said Blandina was charming.

TRAFFORD, recalling, overwhelmed.

Well, she is!

LADY BRISKET.

Then if you think so, she's yours. No one will dispute your title!

Re-enter Mrs. JASPER from the other room.

MRS. JASPER, to TRAFFORD, startled, genuinely alarmed at seeing him with Lady BRISKET, but assuming on the instant, in addition to this, an appearance of concern amounting almost to terror.

You here, with Sir Montagu at the door? (To Lady BRISKET, explaining.) I've seen him from the window; he's paying his cab. What if he finds you together?

LADY BRISKET, instantly impressed and throwing herself with equal rapidity into the same agitation as Mrs. JASPER.

What shall I do? where shall I go?

MRS. JASPER, catching Lady BRISKET as she casts about, ready to rush.

Don't stir, or you'll encounter him. (With resolution.) There's only *one* course!

TRAFFORD, affected by their excitement; in suspense.

What's that, Mrs. Jasper?

MRS. JASPER.

Face him where you stand.

TRAFFORD, after an instant, pulling himself together.

Very good; I'll face him.

LADY BRISKET, quick as a flash, to TRAFFORD.

And what good will that do *me?*

MRS. JASPER, to TRAFFORD, very gravely and ominously.

It's not enough to protect yourself, Mr. Trafford. You ought to take an attitude that will protect this lady.

TRAFFORD, quick, nervous, at a loss; falling at haphazard into a droll, wild position of defence.

I'll take any attitude you like!

MRS. JASPER, as if with pity for his simplicity.

I don't mean that of physical violence, Mr. Trafford. You must find some plausible pretext, some other explanation of your presence.

TRAFFORD, thinking, heated.

Some "other"? That's all very well. (With helpless anguish.) What other?

LADY BRISKET, with growing agitation.

Think of one, for pity's sake; think of one quickly!

TRAFFORD, desperate, to Lady BRISKET, who has turned her back in her own despair.

Well then, I came for Mrs. Jasper. I came for her alone!

LADY BRISKET, flashing round indignantly.

You proclaim it, then; you glory in it?

MRS. JASPER, with high and terrible reproach.

You should be more considerate, Mr. Trafford, of a woman you've sorely embarrassed, a woman you've grievously (hesitating an instant, then bringing, with immense expression, the word out) compromised!

LADY BRISKET, dropping out of it; sinking into a chair with her face in her hands.

Oh heaven!

TRAFFORD, looking from one to the other, then at Mrs. JASPER and appealing to her in dismay.

You don't mean to say I've done that?

MRS. JASPER.

You may not have done it for *me*, Mr. Trafford, but it's sufficient if you've done it for her husband.

TRAFFORD, impatient, incredulous; with a movement of rebellion.

Oh, damn her husband!

MRS. JASPER, quick.

Isn't it enough to have damned *her*? (Lady BRISKET springs up in her distress, and TRAFFORD as quickly sinks into another chair and into the overwhelmed posture she has just quitted. Lady BRISKET crosses swiftly to Mrs. JASPER and throws herself into her arms. Mrs. JASPER, holding Lady BRISKET in her arms, looks a moment fixedly at TRAFFORD, who then rises slowly, returning, in blank despair and confessed humiliation, her look. Lady BRISKET on this quits Mrs. JASPER and goes up, and Mrs. JASPER continues to TRAFFORD.) There's *one* way to avert suspicion that's comparatively easy.

TRAFFORD.

Easy?

MRS. JASPER.

Easy for your honour.

TRAFFORD, breathless.

What is it?

Re-enter the PARLOUR-MAID.

PARLOUR-MAID.

Sir Montagu Brisket!

MRS. JASPER, to TRAFFORD.

You'll see what it is. (Re-enter Sir MONTAGU. Exit the PARLOUR-MAID. Mrs. JASPER continues, meeting Sir MONTAGU'S eyes before, in his sudden astonishment at the sight of his wife and of TRAFFORD, he can speak, and addressing him with bright assurance.) Mr. Trafford is still in England; but for whom do you suppose he has stayed?

SIR MONTAGU, undecided, but looking at TRAFFORD coldly and sternly, in a manner to place upon him the burden of proof and to justify Mrs. JASPER's picture of the gravity of the situation and the degree of an aggravated husband's displeasure.

I shall be glad to learn from Mr. Trafford himself.

TRAFFORD, to Sir MONTAGU, with an heroic effort and after a moment's supreme hesitation, but bringing it out at last with a gallantry calculated to redeem his character.

For Miss Wigmore!

SIR MONTAGU, a little staggered, but catching at the reassurance and addressing Mrs. JASPER.

What will Captain Prime say to that?

MRS. JASPER.

We shall hear in a moment.

SIR MONTAGU.

And what will Mrs. Wigmore say?

MRS. JASPER.

"You must take what you can get."

SIR MONTAGU.

And what will Blandina?

MRS. JASPER, very sweetly.

"Yes, mamma."

Re-enter the PARLOUR-MAID.

PARLOUR-MAID.

Mrs. and Miss Wigmore!

MRS. JASPER.

You see if they don't!

Enter Mrs. WIGMORE and BLANDINA. Exit the PARLOUR-MAID

MRS. WIGMORE, majestical, to Mrs. JASPER, recovering herself after the shock immediately produced by the presence of TRAFFORD.

We have tracked Captain Prime to this retreat.

MRS. JASPER, gay, as PRIME reappears.

Here he is, Mrs. Wigmore, peeping out!

Re-enter Captain PRIME from the other room.

PRIME.

I just saw you alight.

MRS. WIGMORE, with formidable significance, to PRIME.

We came in a four-wheeler. It waits!

PRIME, good-humoured.

Be easy, Mrs. Wigmore; I'll pay it.

MRS. JASPER, to TRAFFORD.

Mr. Trafford, those are privileges that another ought now to claim.

MRS. WIGMORE.

I can scarcely express my amazement at meeting Mr. Trafford again.

TRAFFORD, who has accepted the situation and tries to make the best of it.

I'm sure *I*'m delighted to meet Miss Wigmore!

MRS. WIGMORE, staring.

Miss Wigmore?

MRS. JASPER, to Mrs. WIGMORE.

Your daughter's the innocent cause of Mr. Trafford's procrastination. He will be obliged to me for revealing to you that he has conceived a respectful passion for Blandina.

MRS. WIGMORE, stupefied.

Since when?

MRS. JASPER.

Since the first day he beheld her. (Then after an instant.) He made dear Amy his confidant.

LADY BRISKET, emulating Mrs. JASPER'S assurance.

Perpetually!

SIR MONTAGU, also rather stupefied, but at the same time both reassured and amused.

I say, dear Amy!

LADY BRISKET.

You needn't say anything.

MRS. WIGMORE, who, after looking in her astonishment from one person to the other, rests her eyes on Captain PRIME.

And what does Blandina's affianced husband say to the respectful passion of another?

PRIME.

He says, dear madam, that he resigns that high position. Miss Wigmore, I restore you to liberty.

MRS. JASPER, to Mrs. WIGMORE.

I have the honour then—in my own house and on Mr. Trafford's behalf—to ask you for your daughter's hand.

TRAFFORD, who has been gazing at BLANDINA a moment, now crossing to her.

Miss Wigmore, you *are* charming!

MRS. WIGMORE, to TRAFFORD, struck, recalling.

I remember you told me you thought so. (Then in another tone.) Blandina! (She pauses, considering and looking round at the others an instant, during which BLANDINA is submissively silent.) You must take what you can get.

BLANDINA, after a moment.

Yes, mamma.

MRS. WIGMORE, majestically and, as it were, officially, to the company.

I have therefore a still greater honour: that of announcing to you my daughter's engagement to Mr. Trafford.

SIR MONTAGU, smiling, to Lady BRISKET, while TRAFFORD kisses BLANDINA's fingers and COVERLEY reappears.

I rejoice in that!

Re-enter CHARLES COVERLEY from the hall.

PRIME, to the company.

I have the greatest honour of all, that of announcing *my* engagement to Mrs. Jasper.

LADY BRISKET, to Sir MONTAGU.

I rejoice in *that!*

SIR MONTAGU, pleading, to Mrs. JASPER.

Forget my blind words; I came back only to be forgiven.

LADY BRISKET, to Mrs. JASPER.

Forgive mine, dear friend; I won't stir from here till you do.

MRS. JASPER.

I'll forgive you both if you'll forgive each other.

SIR MONTAGU.

It's done!

MRS. JASPER.

And understand each other.

LADY BRISKET.

I think we're beginning.

COVERLEY, amazed, appalled; reaching Mrs. JASPER's left while PRIME is on her right and after he has, on hearing PRIME'S last speech and during her momentary dialogue with the BRISKETS, passed questioning, or almost reeled, in his incredulity and dismay, successively to TRAFFORD, to BLANDINA, to Mrs. WIGMORE and to PRIME.

Are you really going to *marry* him?

MRS. JASPER, looking at him an instant with a compassionate, confessing smile in which, before she speaks, he already reads his doom and from which he turns with a movement of extravagant despair, while she transfers her happy eyes and gives her right hand to Captain PRIME.

I'm really going to marry him!

END OF VOL. I

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